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Recognition, Humility and Education: A Hermeneutic Approach

by Matthew Murray

(Philosophy 1160)

Often, in the fear of uncertainty and doubt, students adopt the familiar habit of imitation, in this case, imitation or the reproduction of ideas set up by the orator. Knowledge is reduced to a collection of data or facts, left untouched and unevaluated, only to be recited later. This detached process continues steadily with the comforting, yet fleeting feeling, which accompanies impersonal knowledge. Students drag disembodied information to the next class, where incoherent knowledge is added to the pile. The problem being examined here stems from a teacher-learner relationship deprived of humility, genuine dialogue, and recognition. This method of teaching in modern education is repeatedly unquestionably accepted in universities today. Sixteenth century Renaissance philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, warned us about the dangers of a “well-filled brain” opposed to a “well-formed” character or student; “Teachers are forever bawling into our ears as though pouring knowledge down through a funnel: our task is merely to repeat what we have been told” (169). When knowledge is transmitted in an unbalanced fashion, it is stripped of its meaningfulness and its contemporary significance to the learner. What is left is a curriculum dedicated to a strict methodology, leaving little room for improvisation.

A common misconception about the teacher-learner relationship is that its ultimate aim is repetition or the “mere reproduction of knowledge” (Gadamer 45). The reproduction of such knowledge is described lyrically by Montaigne; “Our souls are moved only at second-hand, being shackled and constrained to what is desired by someone else’s ideas; they are captives, enslaved to the authority of what they have been taught” (170). If students are unable to actively participate in the event of learning, education will merely be replication of pre-given information, and remain unproductive. Twentieth century philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer thought if one is conscious of the act of repeating itself, reproductive knowledge could eventually turn into productive, meaningful knowledge (45). Gadamer writes, “Understanding is aware of the fact that it is indeed an act of repeating” (45). Students consciously imitating stand out among others, who unconsciously reproduce foreign knowledge.

It’s imperative to distinguish the difference between the “mere reproduction of knowledge” and the conscious reproduction of knowledge. As previously noted, if knowledge in today’s dynamic society is only diluted information or completely factual and habitual the learner doesn’t search for knowledge, but repeats it. By recalling or searching, “it is the privilege of representation-memory to allow us, in a search of a particular image to remount the slope of our past” (Ricoeur 25). Distinct recollection isn’t acted, but represented (Ricoeur 25). In fact, originating in Plato’s *Meno*, knowledge is recollection or *anamnesis*, drawing its inheritance from the continuation of the soul. “The soul preexists the body, and was consciously in possession of knowledge in its earlier state” (Scott 15). Knowledge remains rooted, deprived of its potentiality unless drawn out. Gadamer revisits the essential feature of recognition drawing attention to its capacity to understand *more*, opposed to merely imitating: “The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing more than is already familiar” (Gadamer 113).

When teachers raise questions in the classroom students perform a search, enabling the past to be fused with the present. Struggling through recollection lets a former idea transform into something *more* than what it was when previously experienced. Without the struggle accompanying recognition, understanding limits itself to positive habit memory, a feeling of ease by successfully

activating what was already actualized (Ricoeur 58). A method of impersonal, habitual memory avoids forgetting at all costs and denies being affected and moved by knowledge (Ricoeur 66). The activity of understanding isn't interpreted; rather, information is engraved into one's mind. The uneasiness associated with recollection shouldn't divert itself from the struggle. It's crucial to cope with the finiteness and endless striving that never reaches a concise conclusion in education. Learning is not static, it's dynamic; an interpretative endeavor confronting the undertaking of understanding with an open mind.

When using the phrase open-minded, by no means am I referring to the sort of open-mindedness practiced in our society. The popular consensus interprets the phrase as indecisiveness or unwillingness to pass judgment. Opposing this theory, existentialist philosopher Robert Solomon also rejects this idea, commenting, "We do not live with open minds and curiosity, accepting whatever comes our way. We survive on our predeterminations and expectations" (139). Being open-minded should rightly be rethought and be given further examination.

Education is stymied by a methodology concerned solely with the mere reproduction of ideas. Instead, it ought to focus on interpretation, not only of the subject matter, but also of the interpretation and reinterpretations of one's self.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and its role in Education

In order for an education of reciprocity, a hermeneutical approach is necessary. Hermeneutics, a discipline originating from the Greek messenger god, Hermes, is routinely defined as the art of interpretation. Since hermeneutics is an immemorial practice, the term itself has undergone reinterpretations throughout history. My focus will be on what Gadamer calls philosophical hermeneutics, a phenomenological understanding of meaning and interpretation following in the footsteps of Heidegger.

To understand the meaning of a text with objective certainty, past philosophers and historicists stepped outside their situation to examine an author's intentions or historical situation. Several methods practiced in Romantic hermeneutics and the Enlightenment highlighted the autonomous, masterful genius behind an exemplary work of art. The trend continued to "pay homage to the Cartesian and Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous subject who successfully extricates himself from the immediate entanglements of history and the prejudices that come with that entanglement" (Linge xiv). It is this prejudice-less, hermeneutical problem which Gadamer described as "prejudice against prejudice itself" (Gadamer 273).

Shifting the reader's attention from what lays "behind the text," Gadamer emphasizes *what is there*, or "the subject matter of the text itself" (Linge xx). Heidegger wrote in *Being and Time*, "In every case this interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance in fore-having" (Heidegger 191). A reader cannot extricate himself from interpretation, and always sees something *as* something (Heidegger 189). Gadamer writes, "A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole when some initial meaning emerges in the text" (Gadamer 269). This ongoing process, otherwise known as the hermeneutic circle, continues as the reader casts fore-meanings throughout the text (Gadamer 271).

Contrary to Romanticism and the Enlightenment, whose effort consisted in avoiding misunderstanding and eliminating a reader's prejudice from the process of understanding, Gadamer developed the notion *positive prejudice*. "It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being" (Gadamer 9). Prejudices create an openness, permitting one to transform the strangeness of a text to speak to oneself, exclusively and anew (Gadamer 9). A reader participates in what is said within the text and doesn't throw himself outside his own situatedness into the author's mind. Essentially, the strangeness one encounters with a text is similar to how a student encounters unfamiliar information and knowledge. If ridding ourselves from our own historicity and prejudgments limit the possibility of genuine understanding, how should one include oneself in

understanding the strangeness of a tradition we haven't experienced? What's required of the student if one's preconceptions and prejudices are inescapable? If prejudices should be included in education will the student act only according to his or her self-interest?

"Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer 293). Tradition is not set up independently of our own history, "We are always already affected by history" (Gadamer 300). Since man is finite and placed in a pre given situation, understanding always takes place with our past performing in the background. In order to settle the hermeneutical aporia, Gadamer works out an idea he calls the "fusion of horizons" (Linge xiv). Understanding involves a fusion of our hermeneutical situation with the otherness of a historical horizon (Gadamer 302). This doesn't mean completely discrediting the historical horizon and merely paying attention to our own tradition; rather, as Gadamer describes it, "We must imagine the other situation" with a sense of openness giving the student or reader the opportunity to rise "to a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity but also that of the other" (Gadamer 304).

Students should actively participate in the reinterpretation of their preconceptions with the historical tradition, bridging the two horizons to create new meanings applicable to one's situation. Remaining open to meanings embedded in a text or lecture is essential for changing habitual knowledge to ever changing contemporary knowledge. Before rushing to the others intentions or historical implications, teachers who make room for the subject matter to resonate and settle with the learner create ever-growing possibilities for self-understanding and legitimate reflection.

In order to bring forth possibilities in the classroom, the conversational element to education needs discussion. How can the teacher-learner relationship cooperate without abusing the dialogue with one's prejudices? Is it possible to remain humble if we are already spun in a web of our own preconceived opinions?

Conversation and Humility in Education

Influenced greatly by the Socratic method and the conversational structure found in Plato's writing, Gadamer explores the possibilities in the everydayness of Plato's dialogical inquiry. "Dialectic, by contrast, lives from the power from dialogical understanding—from the understanding of others who go along—and is sustained every step of its way by making sure of the partner's agreement" (Gadamer 18). Within the midst of the *maieutic* method first a question arises. "The essence of the question is to have sense" (Gadamer 356). A question is directed or has a "sense of direction" at someone else and opens up a realm of possibilities prior to an answer (Gadamer 356). In genuine dialogue the recipient must permit what the other is about to say in order for the word to resonate. Gadamer states that this is the only way that the word "becomes binding" (106). Without sincere humility to the questioner the possibilities diminish in everyday dialogue. It is no wonder why Gadamer points out in the above quotation that the essence of the dialectic cannot reverberate without the partner's agreement.

Montaigne writes, "In our commerce with others, silence and modesty are the most useful qualities" (173). Humility in education and conversation allows the process of understanding to be a life-changing experience. Teachers unwilling to include dialogue attempt to provide an explanation preceding the actual experience that not only closes the gap of reciprocal understanding, but also lessens the experience of conversation to explanation. A classroom with omniscient students eventually would reach an educational impasse, becoming futile and closing the conversational element and horizon. All the knowledge that we think is certain is susceptible to being questioned in everyday linguistic communication and the classroom. "When we speak to one another we do not so much transmit well-defined facts, as place our own aspirations and knowledge into a broader and richer horizon through dialogue with the other" (Gadamer 106). Transmitting knowledge to someone else is not a mere reciting of facts; rather it engages our own historicity in the process of

understanding. Before an immediate recognizable, unquestionable Truth, there is an interactive dialogue guiding the process. This clearing opens and permits humility in the midst of the conversation. The contingency of conversation unfastens the focus from purely unequivocal knowledge to a participation in learning. Gadamer describes this as the hermeneutic character of speech (106). This question and answer participation engages one to contemplate one's own understanding. A comprehensive conversation triggers a *motivated* response to the other.

With this essay I aspired to unveil the features indispensable to the teacher-learner relationship and the handling of knowledge. These features included a productive portrayal of imitation and recognition. Also, I covered Gadamer's views concerning prejudice, effective history, their educational implications, the dialogical structure essential to the teacher-learner relationship and the importance of humility in a classroom setting.

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