

Chapter 2

The Acknowledged Self

Understanding begins ... when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. (Gadamer 2004, 298)

2.1 Introduction

Hermeneutics is primarily concerned with the question of how we understand the human world and its relation to the natural world. Its primary response to that question is that understanding necessarily involves an element of interpretation. Understanding, in other words, is not about reception and revelation, but about how we interpret what we have received and are receiving and what has been and is being revealed. Starting from this premise, hermeneutics developed as an important branch of interpretive methodology—whereby the principles upon which textual miss-readings might be identified and valid readings ratified—were established and applied in the interpretation of, in particular, religious texts within the Judeo-Christian canon but also more generally within the Western and European humanistic canon.

Philosophical hermeneutics was shaped by this largely Eurocentric outlook, but was premised on a further and more universal assumption; namely, that interpretation is part of the human condition. We are born into a world that requires us to make sense of it. That is what defines our common humanity. There is, then, a clear link between hermeneutics as a philosophical field of enquiry and ontology as the field of philosophical enquiry devoted to the nature of being and becoming. For Gadamer, this link was vitally important and one which he built on to establish the ethical bases of hermeneutics: it is by making sense of the world—and of ourselves in the world—that we realise our full human potential as ethical agents.

The main theme pursued in this chapter—the acknowledged self—represents one of a triad of themes that provides the underlying structure for Chaps. 2 and 3. In this chapter the emphasis is on the need to acknowledge the subjective or personal element in human understanding. Understanding opens up the possibility of new beginnings, but those new beginnings, argues Gadamer, are grounded in the particularity of our origins. In thinking about the nature of human understanding—which is

precisely the task we set ourselves when we enter the field of hermeneutics—we are necessarily thinking about what we should make of ourselves, how we should live, how we might become more truly ourselves. It is this emphasis on becoming ourselves that gives to Gadamerian hermeneutics its distinctive ethical strain.

2.2 From Vico to Gadamer

In mid-18th Century Milan an obscure professor of rhetoric named Giambattista Vico claimed to have uncovered ‘the order of all progress from its first origins’. He elaborated this ‘order of progress’ in terms of what he termed ‘the course of nations’ central to which was ‘the recurrence of human institutions’: ‘at first there were forests, then cultivated fields and huts, next small houses and villages, thence cities, and at last academies and philosophers’ (Vico 2001, 15). Implicit in his argument is that these human institutions are historically situated, but that they constitute a category that is sustainable across history. Writing both within and against the Enlightenment that had illuminated the scientific potential of the natural world, Vico was exercised by the idea that the divinely ordained natural world can only be understood in the light of the human world that had evolved and was still evolving in time. (Erich Auerbach’s essays on Vico—written between 1932 and 1958—remain an invaluable introduction to Vico’s significance within the hermeneutical tradition. See Auerbach 2014, 3–55).

That world, Vico sought to show, could only be understood chronologically. History was, as he saw it, the key to worldly understanding. He set out to establish an understanding of the evolution of human societies that was as revolutionary in its time as Darwin’s application of the notion of ‘evolution’ to the life sciences over a hundred years later. He lay the foundations of what we now categorise as ‘the humanities’ and of what is now practiced as ‘anthropology’, ‘cultural studies’, ‘history’, ‘sociology’, etc.—but never lost sight of the partiality of human understanding. ‘There is always’, as the literary and cultural critic Said (2004, 12) put it, ‘something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge that Vico never loses sight of’.

However, the impact of Vico’s *New Science* extends beyond ‘the humanities’. His studies were, maintained Gadamer (1977, 63), ‘a true prototype of hermeneutics’. The third edition of this work published in the year of his death—and, as stated on the cover page of that edition, ‘thoroughly corrected revised, and expanded by the author’—shows how all human knowledge is historically located and therefore open to interpretation. The ‘rules’ of science, as developed by contemporaries such as Newton, were not—he implied—absolute and for all time. They were necessarily relative to their age and, as such, open to question. They were *interpretable*. Vico routed the tradition of hermeneutic enquiry—that was as old as Socrates—into the modern age of scientific enquiry. The world, he suggested, is not entirely given, but made through our own understanding of it; and, as

Marx went on to argue, if the world is what we make of it, then we can struggle to make of it a better world. Vico's great, sprawling, and (by our contemporary standards) unscholarly work is the hinge upon which the hermeneutic tradition turns towards historical consciousness.

Two insights in particular form the basis of that tradition. The first insight is that *in any attempt at interpretation we are interpreting that which has already been interpreted*. The object of our interpretation is a construct that we inherit from the historical layering of countless prior interpretations and re-interpretations. There is no blank page of history upon which we can inscribe our entirely original understandings. History is a palimpsest of layered inscriptions and layered commentaries. The second insight follows from the first. If all understanding is always already interpretation, then *the interpreter is part of what is being interpreted*. The subject that interprets is implicit in the object of interpretation. Notions of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' as the privileged criteria of rationality become increasingly difficult to justify in the light of this second insight. 'Objective' reality is the inter-subjective space of human understanding: the in-between space in which our 'subjective' understandings encounter one another. 'Our very mode of being', as Pippin (2002, 232) puts it, 'is interpretive; we exist "understandingly," in an always already "understood" world.'

These two insights were implicit—rather than explicit—in *New Science*. Vico was feeling his way towards a new world view that was still embryonic. He was fascinated by pre-history and how, prior to a chronological and sequential notion of time, people nevertheless located themselves historically. He understood that the past was another country which had to be understood on its own terms rather than on our terms. His formulation of the 'epochs of world history' into 'the ages of gods, heroes, and men' may seem strange and esoteric to us, but in its time it was path breaking in its insistence on past epochs as interpretive constructs expressed in terms of mythology, political constitutions, and legal frameworks. History is what we make of it and what we make of it is inextricable from how we understand it. These were ideas that would inspire and inform the work of, among others, Karl Marx and James Joyce. At the time, however, Vico was still finding a language and form within which to express and elaborate them.

A third insight follows from the first two and was developed in particular by Gadamer. Interpretation, he saw, is not a supplement to understanding, but is 'the explicit form of understanding' such that 'understanding is always interpretation' (Gadamer 2004, 306). So, if understanding is made manifest through interpretation and the interpreter is inevitably implicated in what is being interpreted, then *all understanding necessarily involves an element of self-understanding*. Gadamer elaborated this insight with reference to the notion of 'application', which he understood as being implicit in all understanding from the moment of its inception. It is not that understanding is achieved and then applied, but that the application is intrinsic to the process of understanding: 'in all understanding an application occurs, such that the person who is understanding is himself or herself *right there* in the understood meaning. He or she *belongs to* the subject-matter that he or she is understanding ... Everyone who understands something understands himself or

herself in it' (original emphases, Gadamer 2001, 47–48) The hermeneutical task, as Gadamer defines it, is to locate oneself within one's own field—or, as he would put it, 'tradition'—of understanding: a task that inevitably takes time since it is only over time that we become aware of how our various acts of understanding impact upon our self-understanding.

The idea of 'tradition' is central to hermeneutics as developed by Gadamer: 'we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions—none of this changes the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding' (p. 45). Traditions pose questions in response to which we define ourselves and our own sense of purpose. The coherence of any tradition, as understood by Gadamer, can only be defined with reference to its intrinsic plurality and potential for innovation. Traditions are constantly evolving as new generations interpret and re-interpret them and, by so doing, modify and elaborate them. Traditions may initially present themselves to us as assertions, but, as Gadamer (1977, 11–13) insists, 'no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way ... The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable'. The 'questionableness' of things is—as we shall see—one of the major pedagogical principles to be derived from the hermeneutic tradition as advanced by Gadamer.

2.3 'The Power of Prejudice'

What the interpreter brings to the process of interpretation is vitally important. We understand the world in relation to what we bring to it by way of prior assumptions, preconceptions, and prejudices. We understand the world in and through our experience of the world. This perspective, as Gadamer (2004, 271) puts it, 'involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices'.

If we are an integral part of the world that we are seeking to understand, then we can 'formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics as follows: what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?' (p. 278) Prejudice—our historicity—is where interpretation begins: 'the concept of "prejudice" is where we can start' (p. 273). We bring to the task of interpretation values and assumptions that are uniquely shaped by our origins. The renowned literary scholar Greenblatt (2013, 5) makes this point tellingly when he writes: 'I am incapable of simply bracketing my own origins; rather, I find myself trying to transform them, most often silently and implicitly, into the love that I bring to my work'. There are social practices that hold—and carry forward—traditions of being that give meaning to our lives and purpose to our actions.

Gadamer insists that this importing of ourselves into the process of understanding is a necessary component of that understanding. However, he also insists that we must be aware of what we are importing. Some of our prejudices may assist understanding, while others may distort or deny understanding. A large part of the hermeneutical task involves self-examination through the sifting of prejudices. To have trust in an interpretation is to trust that the interpreter has undergone this process of self-examination in respect of the values and assumptions that have shaped that interpretation. Similarly, to trust in one's own interpretive capacity is not to have blind faith in one's own convictions, but to trust in one's own commitment to questioning those convictions. Trust is a necessary condition of understanding and understanding is a necessary condition of our being in the world. If we trusted nothing in this world of ours, then it would be a world beyond our understanding—and a world beyond our understanding is no longer *our* world.

Education—which prepares successive generations to take responsibility for their world—is therefore premised on trust: trust between teachers and taught, trust between learners, trust in the possibility of understanding. Whatever militates against trust diminishes education. Relationships based on fear or coercion, assessment procedures that highlight weakness and failure, activities that prioritise competition over collaboration: these are all factors that erode the trust upon which education is based. Whatever, on the other hand, helps to build trust strengthens and enhances education. Relationships based on respect, formative feedback that affirms and encourages the learner, activities that favour collaboration and recognise the value of what each brings to the collaborative task: these all contribute to trust and thereby enhance the educational experience.

Gadamer insists on the need for a 'hermeneutics of trust' rather than a 'hermeneutics of suspicion': a hermeneutics that focuses on understanding rather than misunderstanding and on interpretation rather than misinterpretation. That is why Gadamer (1977, 8) argues that hermeneutics cannot be 'restricted to a technique for avoiding misinterpretation': misinterpretation through the application of inappropriate prejudices is to be avoided, but that avoidance does not in itself constitute understanding. I gain understanding not only by rejecting inappropriate prejudices, but by using other of my prejudices to connect with what I am seeking to understand. In explicit opposition to the scientific ideal of objectivity devoid of all prejudice, Gadamer insists on the productive power of prejudice. He rejects as alienating the mistrust of the subject—and of 'subjectivity'—that he sees as implicit in that ideal. He argues, instead, for the necessity of trusting to the subject—and to 'subjectivity'—in all understanding.

Gadamer is in effect inviting us—and encouraging us—to acknowledge ourselves in that which we seek to understand. He refuses to accept that we need to bracket ourselves out of the process of understanding in order to achieve 'objectivity'. We are—he maintains—positioned *within* the field of our own understanding and need to acknowledge our own 'positionality' rather than deny it. We cannot occupy some neutral space beyond or above the epistemological fray. There is no Archimedean point from which to gain some kind of ultimate cognitive

leverage. There is only the hermeneutic subject who brings to the task of understanding her or his own historically constructed consciousness.

Was Gadamer—as Hirsch (1965, 1967) claimed—a relativist? Relativism takes many forms, but in every version the claim is that there is no one absolute truth beyond the culturally and historically embedded truth. Truth, in other words is a relative term. Gadamer rejected what he saw as the false dichotomy implicit in this binary opposition between absolute and relative truth. Rather he takes as his model ‘truth as it emerges in the experience of art’, central to which are notions of ‘Bildung’ (cultural formation), ‘sensus communis’ (common sense), ‘judgement’ and ‘taste’ (Gadamer 2004, 1–37). These notions are an attempt to conceptualise what Gadamer sees as key elements within our cultural and historical legacy. They are manifestations of what he terms our ‘historically effected consciousness’ (Gadamer 2004, 335–382). This historical layering of human consciousness is what we bring to the task of understanding not as means to an end but as a vital element in the truth we seek through understanding. For Gadamer, as Dostal (2002, 256) puts it, ‘the truth-event takes time, requires language, and is the result of mediation, dialectic, and conversation’.

The historical layering of consciousness occurs very largely through language. Gadamer (1977, 62) argues that ‘[l]anguage is by no means simply an instrument, a tool ... Rather, in all our knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own.’ It is because language is all-encompassing that ‘[w]e are always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world. To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world’ (p. 64). It is in and through language that we become ourselves: ‘Hence language is the real medium of human being ... the realm of common understanding, of ever-replenished common agreement’ (p. 68). Language carries the fore-meanings that shape our consciousness, but allows us a ‘realm of common understanding’ in which to question those fore-meanings. Far from being the passive recipients of an already ‘historically effected consciousness’, we are active agents in its continuing formation.

2.4 The Self-as-Questioner

The question is the means by which the ‘historical consciousness’ is ‘effected’. Understanding’, argues Gadamer (2004, 298), ‘begins ... when something addresses us’. But that ‘something’ can only address us when we confront it with the particular question that we wish to ask of it. Who gets to ask the questions is, therefore, a crucial issue for Gadamer, who insists that it is the impulse to question that makes understanding possible. To question is to take a leap into the dark—a leap of the imagination—within which we discover ourselves through the process of inquiry. So, while Gadamer’s emphasis on questioning has affinities with what is referred to as ‘the Socratic method’, it differs markedly in respect of his insistence on the student as questioner. The pedagogical process whereby the teacher is the

lead questioner only makes sense from Gadamer's perspective if the purpose of the teacher's questioning is to encourage the student to become her or his own questioner. Teachers may model what it is to be a questioner. They may even prod us into shaping and sharpening our questions. But they cannot ask the questions on our behalf. Only we—as learners—can do that.

There is, in Gadamer's emphasis on 'the primacy of the question' a strong pull towards the ontological—towards, that is, a philosophical preoccupation with the nature of being and becoming. Our capacity to question makes us of us what we are and what we become. Crucially, questions open up new possibilities. 'The essence of the *question*', as Gadamer (original emphasis, 2004, 298) puts it 'is to open up possibilities and keep them open.' Questions extend our horizons. 'Open' questions in particular—questions, that is, which unlike 'closed' questions do not presuppose a 'yes' or 'no' response—invite us to speculate regarding the options open to us, the choices available to us, and the different courses of action that may ensue. Such questions confront us with the unpredictability of the future, while encouraging us to assume responsibility for shaping that future.

The ontology of the question as conceived by Gadamer has huge educational implications. Questions not only open up future possibilities but provide us with our unique trajectories: our sense of purpose, which is, of course, integral to our sense of self. They direct us towards specific lines of inquiry and particular courses of action. They shift the dimension of inquiry from the horizontal plane of infinite possibility to the vertical plane of focused inquiry. Our questions determine what we attend to and what we attend to informs who we are and what we become. Questioning also draws us into the communicative world of addressor and addressee. Questions presuppose a respondent, which may be the self in internal dialogue or a wider community of shared interest and concern. The crucial point is that through the formulation of questions we engage in an ongoing process of communicative engagement, which—to return to Gadamer's refutation of the charge of relativism—constitutes 'a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees the truth' (Gadamer 2004, 484).

Above all, questions are our human response to whatever is incomprehensible in the world around us. 'Hermeneutics', argued Gadamer (1977, 98), 'operates whenever what is said is not immediately intelligible'. Questions, then, are both an acknowledgement of our limitations in respect of understanding and an expression of our urge to overcome those limitations. They define us as creatures who dwell in the uncertainty and anxiety of partial understanding, while craving a fuller understanding of the partially understood world we inhabit. It is only by questioning the world around us that we can begin to understand it; and it is only by understanding that world that we can begin to feel at home within it.

The ontological aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics owes much to Heidegger. But, as I argued in Chap. 1, Gadamer kept his distance from his early mentor. As Heidegger became increasingly drawn towards a 'pure' ontology, Gadamer continued to insist on the hermeneutical grounding of ontology in the specificity of the text through the process of reading and re-reading, interpreting and re-interpreting. He was concerned with how we interpret our shared world; how our diverse

interpretations inform our daily lives, our day-to-day judgements, and our routine decisions; how they render our world meaningful. Above all he insists that understanding is ordinary—that it is intrinsic to who we are and what we aspire to be. We become ourselves as we relate more fully to the world around us. But we can only generate that sense of relatedness—or interconnectedness—by adopting an inquiring stance to what is strange and unfamiliar in the world and thereby enfolding it within our expanding horizon of comprehension.

2.5 Becoming Ourselves

The hermeneutic tradition—as developed by Gadamer—presupposes the desirability of a culture which acknowledges the need for each individual to realise her or his own potential. Such a culture develops in response to the question of how we should live: a response based on the assumption that, as the philosopher and scholar of US constitutional law Dworkin (2011, 13) put it, ‘we each have a sovereign ethical responsibility to make something of our own lives, as a painter makes something valuable of his canvas’. The prime *ethical* concern, in other words, is ‘to make something of our own lives’: to become ourselves within the conditions we inherit and, in so doing, to shape those conditions for following generations.

‘In a future Gadamerian culture,’ argues the philosopher Rorty (2000, 25), ‘human beings would wish only to live up to one another, in the sense in which Galileo lived up to Aristotle, Blake to Milton ... The relationship between predecessor and successor would be conceived ... not as the power-laden relation of “overcoming” (*Überwindung*) but as the gentler relation of turning to new “purposes”’ (*Verwindung*). This ‘future Gadamerian culture’ is very close to what Gadamer himself discussed in terms of ‘Bildung’—a notion which traditionally relates the ideas of cultural formation and maturation to the humanities. Gadamer, while primarily concerned with the arts and humanities, broadened the argument. For him, ‘Bildung is intimately associated with the idea of culture and designates primarily the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities’ (Gadamer 2004, 9). Gadamer saw ‘Bildung’ as a gathering of the resources of the past into the present and a carrying-forward of those resources into the future: ‘in acquired Bildung nothing disappears, but everything is preserved’ (p. 10). This argument resonates not only within the arts and humanities, but across the broad field of science and technology.

As highlighted in the preface, Gadamer does not spell out comprehensively and systematically what he sees as the educational implications of his emphasis on becoming oneself through the development of ‘one’s natural talents and capacities’. Nevertheless, we can infer from this emphasis—and the arguments that underpin it—some important educational insights. For example, his argument that to understand something is to understand it in its complex historical and cultural nexus

implies the need for interconnectivity across and beyond subject divides, disciplinary boundaries and methodological frameworks. What is needed, argues Maguire (2015, 170), is ‘an intentional approach to transcend boundaries of disciplines and practices to create a new knowledge synthesis within the individual or domain of practice and indeed in society’. That ‘new knowledge synthesis’ is for Gadamer grounded in the historic and cultural interconnectivity of human consciousness. Concepts, ideas and their textual manifestation have a provenance—a cultural history—which is crucial to our understanding of them. Their meaning lies in their interconnectedness. A large part of the curriculum design task is to ensure that curriculum categories are sufficiently porous to allow for this interconnectivity to occur. Similarly, a large part of the pedagogical task is to support the student in making the imaginative leaps necessary to connect across subject divides and curricular boundaries. This emphasis on connecting across epistemological frontiers has huge hermeneutical significance in that it highlights the crucial relation between ‘part’ and ‘whole’ in any attempt at interpretation.

Skinner (2002), the historian of political thought, has written on this subject as it relates specifically to written texts but also more generally to a wide range of speech acts. ‘[T]here is a sense’, he argues, ‘in which we need to understand why a certain proposition has been put forward if we wish to understand the proposition itself. We need to see it not simply as a proposition but as a move in an argument’ (p. 115). If what Skinner terms ‘propositions’ can only be understood as moves in an ongoing argument or conversation, then texts generally—and, indeed, all cultural artefacts—need to be understood ‘inter-textually’ as interventions in a historically located argument or discourse. More generally, Skinner’s argument can be taken to imply that understanding always involves this to-and-fro between ‘part’ and ‘whole’, such that the identification of the object of our understanding is never pre-given but is always an outcome of that understanding. What we may have thought we were trying to understand is altered though our understanding of it. This—to quote Greenblatt (2013, 5) again—‘requires a certain hermeneutical patience ... in order to examine more thoroughly what had been treated as mere background’. Supporting the learner in acquiring this ‘hermeneutical patience’ is again an important part of the pedagogical task.

Understanding, Gadamer reminds us, is always understanding-not-yet-finished: not so much an achieved state as an ongoing process of extending and deepening. This highlights the need for what the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner in his path breaking 1960 *The Process of Education* termed ‘the spiral curriculum’. Such a curriculum is designed to ensure that students revisit topics or subjects across the course their studies, with the complexity of the topic or theme increasing with each recapitulation. The new learning is thereby related to the old learning, while older information and insights are placed within an increasingly expansive and inclusive context of understanding (Bruner 1960). Any such notion of ‘spiral’ progression presupposes continuity and coordination across the stages of primary, secondary, further and higher education. It also implies the need for a radical re-think of

assessment procedures and regimes such that these fulfil a formative role for the student rather than operating as a ‘rite of passage’, a mechanism for social selection, or a means of premature academic selection. Education has no pre-ordained cut-off points. It is continuous and lifelong. In order to ensure and sustain lifelong continuity, institutional frameworks that allow for latitudinal coordination across institutions and longitudinal continuity across life-spans are essential.

Above all, Gadamer’s argument that to understand something is to understand it with reference to our own unique circumstances and histories highlights the need for engagement and motivation as defining features of education. This need can only be met by education systems that are attuned to individual difference. One of the favoured means of differentiation in the past has been to categorise students within broad ability ‘bands’ and/or into ability ‘sets’ for specific subjects or groups of subjects. The system of ‘setting’ is clearly a more sophisticated system of differentiation, since it acknowledges that students may perform differently in different subjects. But neither system acknowledges the full range and complexity of difference within and across categories. As a result the unique individuality of the individuals comprising those categories falls outside the system’s field of vision. It is precisely this unique individuality that Gadamer (Gadamer 2004, 298) highlights when he states that ‘[u]nderstanding begins ... when something addresses us’ and when he declares that this state of being addressed is ‘the first condition of hermeneutics’. Understanding, in other words, begins when something—a text, an equation, an idea, etc.—speaks to the unique circumstances and history of the individual student. The prime task of the educator is to ensure that—whatever system of differentiation is in place and whatever pedagogical practices are employed—the ‘first condition of hermeneutics’ is met and upheld and that the student thereby becomes the agent of her or his own understanding.

Education fulfils various functions: it prepares people (mainly but not exclusively *young* people) for the world of work; it ‘normalises’ them with regard to societal norms and expectations; it operates as a system of academic and indeed social selection. It can offer greater equality of opportunity, but also serves to reproduce existing inequalities and social hierarchies. It can be seen as ‘a public good’, but is increasingly regarded as ‘a private gain’, which—beyond the years of compulsory schooling—should be bought and sold as a commodity. But Gadamer reminds us that education is also a way of becoming ourselves, of flourishing as intelligent and sentient beings, of being alive to the world. Becoming ourselves in this way requires what the theologian Tillich (1952) called ‘the courage to be’: the everyday, commonplace courage required to gather one’s inner resources, gain a sense of integrity and purpose, and achieve agency in an increasingly interconnected yet fractured world. The prime educational task—which is also an ethical task—is to acknowledge and foster ‘the courage to be’ and, in so doing, encourage us all to become ourselves.

Institutions of education committed to the fulfilment of that task would need to ensure that students are free from the institutional constraints that so often inhibit learning. They would need, for example, to refuse to implement assessment regimes that focus on selective differentiation and that fail to provide positive and formative

feedback to students regarding their achievements and their potential; to root out not only overt discriminatory practices but hidden biases in the system and in everyday interactions between students and between students and teachers; and to discourage forms of competition that exclude or alienate particular students or groups of students. They would need to provide students with an institutional environment within which to flourish and fulfil their potential; to encourage them to form and voice their own opinions and define their own individual ends and purposes; to help them turn mistakes and mishaps into opportunities for learning and transform problems into challenges.

There is a paradox about becoming ourselves in that we risk dissolution of the self in every encounter with the strange and unfamiliar—and yet it is only through such encounters that we flourish as human beings. Becoming oneself requires the mental courage to express one's own opinions, form independent judgements, think against the grain of received opinion, and on occasion speak truth to power. Courage is not an abstract principle that can be universally applied, but a disposition that can only be acquired through practice. It relies upon our interpretation of particular situations, and our judgement—based upon that interpretation—of what any given situation requires of us. An intellectually courageous person is not someone who follows a rule-book, but someone who is disposed to follow her or his thinking through into action even when the consequences of doing so may be costly. The teacher encourages this disposition by ensuring that, as Fairfield (2012, 83–84) puts it, 'the student be taken out of the role of the spectator, a role to which many are far too accustomed, and become an agent in their own intellectual life and in the conversation that is their culture'.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the ethical dimension of Gadamer's thought. But the ethical question of how to live well is ultimately inseparable from the moral question of how we should treat others. It is, then, to the moral dimension of Gadamer's thought that we turn in the following chapter. But, in so doing, we do not leave behind the ethical concerns highlighted above. The ethical and the moral are inextricably entwined: we cannot play out our ethics in a state of moral isolation any more than we can work out our morality without due regard for our own ethical integrity. As Dworkin (2011, 19) states, 'living well is more than having your desires satisfied and ... being moral means taking a genuine, not just an instrumental, concern in the lives of others'. So, in turning to the theme of mutual understanding, we are shifting the emphasis from the subjective to the inter-subjective, from the personal to the interpersonal, and from education conceived as individual growth and flourishing to education as a public good.

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