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BASIC CONCEPTS OF HERMENEUTICS:

GADAMER ON TRADITION AND COMMUNITY

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The language we have inherited from our tradition to speak about and understand community is oftentimes a hindrance in the attempt to appreciate the radicality of Gadamer's thought. This paper will reexamine some of the basic terminology of Gadamerian hermeneutics and show how Gadamer translates and transforms the traditionally metaphysical words he deploys in order to free our language and our understanding of language to speak anew of community in a way that opens these words to difference and alterity. Gadamer is committed to tradition and he uses words we have inherited, but he attempts to retrieve and rescue these words, allowing them to become transformed and generate new meanings so that we can think differently and see new possibilities. This of course is part of Gadamer's commitment to tradition and to the hermeneutic task of uncovering new meaning in the context of our historical consciousness. The difficulty is that these words and traditional expressions of meaning are deeply entrenched, and it is easy to bring our presuppositions and prejudices about what they mean to our reading of Gadamer's texts, and thereby miss his attempt to transform their meaning. So, I am hoping that I can help in this essay to allay some of the misunderstandings of hermeneutics that his use of these words has caused. The words I have in mind, though no doubt there are others, are words like unity, universal, fusion of horizons, transcendence, tradition and infinity.

Let me begin this endeavor with a look at Gadamer's understanding of language to see how he offers us a transformed notion that opens us to a sense of language that is not reducible to an already handed down vocabulary and set of grammatical structures that predetermine the way we communicate and relate to each other. Gadamer's unique contribution to our understanding of the power of language is particularly evident in his discussions of literature and poetry: in other words, non-representational language. Gadamer insists often, despite the multiplicity of foreign languages and dialects, that language itself is governed by a principle of unity that makes communication, and even communication across cultures, possible. What he means by this principle of unity is especially made evident in his discussion of the poetic word. He describes the power and significance of the creative word as allowing us to hear in the singularity of the word the very generation of language, while at the same time preserving its unity and integrity. In his essay, "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer says: "In discourse as such we are continually running ahead in thought searching for the meaning, so that we let the appearance of the words fall away as we listen and read for the meaning being conveyed; on the other hand, with a literary text, the self-manifestation of each and every word has a meaning in its sonority."¹ I understand this to say that the unity of a literary, poetic word resonates within itself the whole of language; and in this way, the word generates the text, much like the musical note in relationship to the melody. The word in this sense in its very self-articulation is able to repeat itself and be heard as language. Gadamer puts it this way in *Truth and Method*: There is a dynamic of the word, "which accords to every word an inner dimension of multiplication: every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate."² In the face of reductionist forces that trivialize the power of language to convey the truth of being in our midst, and in face of the prevalence of a politics that tries to reduce to fakery and lies the power of language to form relations and foster community, and in the face of information technology and propositional language that depersonalizes and sedimentizes and rigidifies into already determined actuality the power of language to open us to new possibilities for an enlivened future; in the face of all this, we need to recover the vitality of language if we are once again to regain our capacity to hear in the unity of the poetic word its generative power as language, to hear how language generates itself out of the poetic word, how the one becomes many, how the apparent word becomes meaning. The recovery of the creative word that in its singularity reaches beyond itself to what could be and to what is more than and other than its own limitations as a particular utterance occurs not through our own devices but by virtue of a receptive and attuned listening to what is unsaid that belongs to language and is the source of genuine communication.

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 43.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2013), 474.

For Gadamer, language is not the subjective assertion of agency that dominates and turns everything into a mirror of itself. In speaking, we enter into a space that does not belong to us, or at least not to us alone. To speak is to be in touch with and to be able to be touched by the other; in a space that belongs to neither as the product of agency, but rather a space of intra-subjectivity. I use the word intra-subjective here rather than intersubjective to convey Gadamer's idea that genuine dialogue is not a matter of negotiation between two agents or subjects with fixed points of view who then agree to modify their positions to reach consensus. In contrast, for Gadamer, to be a being who has language and to genuinely speak is already to expose ourselves to what is not our own; it is already to belong to a sphere of alteration and motility that is transformative. This is what it means to be a dialogically engaged human being; that is, transformation and alteration belong to our very way of being. As living poetic beings we are finite, but our way of being finite requires self-transcendence. This is why, in his book *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer announces that the practice of hermeneutics requires three conditions: 1) self-forgetfulness - because "the real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it"; 2) I-lessness - because dialogue does not belong to the sphere of the "I"; and 3) universality - because language is all encompassing and every dialogue "has an inner infinity and no end."³ Gadamer says in *Truth and Method*, "all human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out."⁴ The notion of infinity here is not meant as an appeal to some other realm beyond the finite. It speaks rather to an unendedness and incompleteness at the heart of finitude. To be a linguistically bound human being is not first of all to be a being and then to engage in conversation. Rather we belong in and find ourselves in the midst of conversation. To be conversant is our way of being. To have the word, the desire to speak, is intrinsically a reaching out for. Thus, for Gadamer, a finite, language-oriented being requires the other in order to be a self. This capacity of language to bring us beyond ourselves into communication with others does not mitigate or negate the limitations of our own situatedness or the finitude of our embeddedness in the everyday particularity of our existence. Rather it enriches and intensifies it because we recognize ourselves only in relation to that which is not ourselves.

We are fundamentally relational beings. When we allow ourselves to be addressed by what is other than ourselves, we become aware not only of the other who confronts us with difference but also of our own embeddedness and the possibility of freeing ourselves for new possibilities. When we engage in hermeneutics, we let ourselves be open to new and other perspectives that cause us to alter and expand who we are. As Gadamer says, "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand - not in order to look away from it but to see it better

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. D. Linge, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977. 64-67.

⁴ *Truth and Method*, 474.

within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”⁵ But we also, and for this very reason, invite the other, as Gadamer says, “to present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth.”⁶ The point here is that when genuine communication occurs, when what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” occurs, neither the self nor the other collapse into one; precisely the opposite; they are affirmed in their apartness. As Gadamer says in response to his encounter with Derrida: “I too affirm that understanding is always understanding differently.”⁷ But at the same time a space that belongs to neither alone is opened up; it is the space of communication. In placing ourselves in this open space of dialogue, in risking ourselves and becoming vulnerable to transformation by entering into this horizon of otherness, we do not close off difference nor do we achieve any kind of completeness that absorbs the self or the other into a metaphysical oneness that eradicates separation. Gadamer says in *A Century of Philosophy*: “The horizon that one speaks of in the fusion of horizons of interpretation is nothing that one ever reaches, so it cannot assume a metaphysical position... The horizon of interpretation changes constantly.”⁸ We never reach a fixed horizon that fulfills the interpretive quest that defines the human being. This is the Socratic aspect of Gadamer’s philosophy of interpretation. He says in *Truth and Method*: “The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly 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.”⁹

It is for this reason that Gadamer distances himself from any comparison of his notion of dialogue to philosophies that speak of an I-Thou relationship. Though he advocates respect for the otherness of the other as an essential aspect of communication and transformation through dialogue, he does not believe communication is made possible by two equal, self-identical subjects speaking to one another. Gadamer’s notion of communication is not at all rooted in this sort of notion of subjectivity. The space that is shared in communication does not belong to one or the other. Gadamer says: When we transpose ourselves into the space of communication, “consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity, but also that of the other.”¹⁰

I’ll say a bit more about this appeal to universality later, but what I would like to emphasize here is the sense it conveys of a shared space and a being-together-with that is a belonging together but also a non-belonging to one or the other alone. Communication is not about possession but

⁵ *Truth and Method*, 316.

⁶ *Truth and Method*, 282.

⁷ Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, eds. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 96.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Century of Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer in Dialogue with Richard Dotti*, (London: Continuum Press, 2004), 61.

⁹ *Truth and Method*, 315.

¹⁰ *Truth and Method*, 316.

occurs rather in a movement of dispossession. To take over the space of the other is to close off conversation, as is also the failure to sustain an open invitation to let the other speak and be heard. Gadamer makes this clear in his essay entitled “The Incapacity of Conversation”:

The incapacity for listening is such a well-known phenomenon that one doesn't need to provide illustrations to make it clear. One experiences it sufficiently in oneself when one ignores (überhört) or mishears (falsch hört). And isn't that really one of our basic human experiences, that we fail to perceive in time what is going on with the other, that our ear was not fine enough to 'hear' the other's silence and stubbornness? Or also that one mishears?¹¹

This point is central to Gadamer's notion of experience. One cannot truly experience what one takes for granted and leaves unchallenged and unquestioned. Certainly we can remain in a state of closure with regard to what is already known and go through life in a state that simply confirms what seems to us to be the case in the daily familiarity of our lives. But to “experience” life is to raise into consciousness the limits of what is taken as known and to experience it anew in its fluid relationality with all that surrounds it and to let what seems familiar confront its unfamiliarity so that it once again comes to us in its coming to be.

Experience is an engagement in the ongoing process of life that involves interpretation and thus a productive repetition that exposes what we know to new meaning. Experience is the realization that the present is not a closed and finished state but a reality that opens out onto past and future. This is what makes it possible to open up to ourselves new threads of interrelationships that make evident the connection and disconnection of past and present as well as future possibilities. Gadamer is especially attentive in his work to the way this openness to experience can be felt as negative. But he expresses a positive view of this negativity. He says in *Truth and Method*: “The negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning ... Only through negative instances do we acquire new experiences, as Bacon saw. Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation.”¹² What we thought we knew is challenged and disturbed. The prejudices and familiar threads we wove to hold together our lives are suddenly unthreaded. Still, he insists this negativity of experience, which for him is not to be overcome but is, rather, intrinsic to experience, is the production of meaning. This is why he says that hermeneutics involves staying with the tension between what is known and what is foreign, a tension that is essential to the hermeneutic project of interpretation.

What Gadamer means by experience and becoming engaged in the appeal of life that draws us beyond ourselves into relationship with others becomes clearer in his frequent discussions of beauty. It is important, Gadamer cautions us in *Truth and Method*, to notice that beauty arises in

¹¹ “The Incapacity for Conversation,” trans. David Vessey and Chris Blauwkamp, in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39 (2006), 358.

¹² *Truth and Method*, 362/364.

the radiant exposure of things and thus belongs to what appears and what shows itself to us in its appeal, and yet the beautiful is uncapturable in appearance; its shining always exceeds. This inexpressible unity of beauty, unity in the sense of an excessive appearance that is never able to be captured in any one particular appearance, but belongs to all, this unity that gives itself without exhausting itself, is the source of illumination in which things appear in their manifold shining and in their interconnectedness. Thus, there is an excessive moment of the beautiful that belongs to all things of beauty. In Gadamer's analysis, this ungraspable unity belongs to the plurality of beings that appear. It is in fact what pluralizes and lets things be plural and not just atoms in an unrelated universe. But more than this, this unity of beauty that shatters itself in the midst of things is also what makes it possible for us in interpretation to be attentive to the new and the different that never ceases to belong to things. Gadamer says: "Just as the beautiful is a kind of experience that stands out like an enchantment and an adventure within the whole of experience and presents a special task of hermeneutic integration, what is evident is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on, expanding the range of what we can take into consideration¹³." Beauty for Gadamer symbolizes the infinity, the lack of closure, and the unsurpassability of finite things.

For Gadamer, hermeneutics operates in the play between unity and plurality. All that appears participates in the illumination of beauty in a way that lets what is appear alongside and with others without destroying its singularity. The oneness of beauty, according to Gadamer, is the very basis of community, the basis in the sense that it is what causes things to reach beyond themselves. In his beautiful account of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, it becomes clear that for Gadamer beauty is the generative moment that belongs to all beings that become and, in its illuminative power, it is also what empowers and generates hermeneutics. Gadamer points out that the unitary form of beauty is not something apart from the world of becoming; yet the beautiful is a form of excess that is never reducible to any particular appearance. The moment of beauty is apart; it is other; it cannot be assimilated into appearance; it is the excess of what appears; thus there is a sense in which we can never completely articulate and capture in propositional language what we encounter when we encounter beings in their beauty. The beautiful is for this reason fundamentally unsayable, albeit at the same time it is that which generates in its loveliness the power of language to communicate. It is the instant of wonder and the surprise of the unexpected that generates conversation and yet is never dissolvable into what is said. This aspect of language and conversation that desires what is unknown and perhaps unknowable and uncapturable is not something that can be overcome and certainly the project of hermeneutics is not to explain or domesticate or re-inscribe this excess and openness to what is intrinsically foreign. The gift of community in this sense comes from the stranger, without whom no being-together would be possible.

¹³ Truth and Method, 501.

For Gadamer and Plato, hermeneutics is about how the one and the many, the idea and the appearance, circulate everywhere and how it is that beauty allows this circulation to occur in a way that avoids dissipation and accomplishes the unity of meaning that we experience through language. But meaning for Gadamer is about generation, rebirth and renewal and not about the domestication of reality by encompassing it into a fixed structure of control. To live meaningfully for Gadamer is to be open to what is unfamiliar and new. Gadamerian hermeneutics is a hermeneutics that acknowledges a moment in conversation that remains utterly and intractably excessive and foreign and is a hermeneutics that acknowledges that this moment is what in fact generates and makes conversation possible.

Hermeneutics for Gadamer is not only about and perhaps not even primarily about an understanding and interpretation of tradition, but about the movement of life and the way the life-world is produced. This is why *Truth and Method* is so deeply indebted to Husserl, Dilthey and Heidegger. Life is a peculiar moving forward while moving back, a kind of double movement, or a movement where moving forward is not just linear but inextricably also a movement of return. This insight into the movement of life is incredibly disclosive for understanding the movement of hermeneutics that is always opened toward and directed toward the future possibilities of understanding, but always so in a way that recoils upon the past. Life and interpretation are both unending movements of recuperation. For this reason, in his book, *The Life of Understanding*, James Risser calls hermeneutics a movement of convalescence. He says: “It is a matter of a recovery in which the recovery remains outstanding.”¹⁴ The movement of life, and the hermeneutic movement of understanding that is attentive to life, never achieves anything like self-possession or identity that finally eradicates all dispossession. As a living being, we can never achieve finality and self-enclosure. For the living being, the continuity of life is always also a discontinuity.

Überlieferung, transmission, is likewise never closed off; genuine tradition is always open-ended, always underway. This way of belonging to a tradition is structurally akin to the way life turns back against itself in its going forward, the way life moves forward by holding itself back. Life opposes life in order to live on, just as tradition lets itself recede into no longer being in order to allow for a future that goes forward anew. This indicates that to live is in some sense to be a stranger unto oneself. This otherness that belongs to the living being allows it to grow and continue to be. This irrecoverable moment of breakdown in the continuity of life; this resistance that does not stop the flow of life but nevertheless holds onto it is, I believe, the space of community; the space of the other or, better, the space for the other, the space that makes communication and transmission possible. In this sense, the other of the space of community is not just the unfamiliar or the not yet familiar, but the essentially foreign, the other that can never be owned by me. This uncapturable other, just like the rupture in the continuity of life, is the other in the understanding

¹⁴ James Risser, *The Life of Understanding: A Contemporary Hermeneutics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 10.

of the self but not the other that belongs to the self; rather it is this not-belonging, this unresolvable otherness, that constitutes and generates the self and sets it perpetually underway.

The theme of community in Gadamer's work, along with the theme of the surprise and wonder in the face of experience, are the motivating forces that drive the movement of thought in his text and these two themes are inextricably connected. If the continuity of life, that is, the identity of the self, can only occur in relationship to a rupture and discontinuity; if identity arises from what is alien to oneself, then what constitutes life and the flow of life is a sharing across the shattered and ruptured space of otherness. As Risser points out in his book *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, "Gadamer's hermeneutics is concerned with the opening of shared life in which one is able to hear the voice of the other."¹⁵ In other words, it is this rupture, this gap and juncture, this holding apart and against, that allows for the event of communication. As Gadamer says: "The effort to understand is needed wherever there is no immediate understanding – i.e., whenever the possibility of misunderstanding has to be reckoned with."¹⁶ With regard to the written text, Gadamer says: "Everything that is set down in writing is to some extent foreign and strange."¹⁷ But this is precisely the hermeneutic condition of communication. Communication occurs across this irrecoverable divide. The oneness and unity that has been emphasized throughout Gadamer's work is, then, in some sense a self-disrupting unity. The unity of community always displaces itself and spreads itself out. And yet, as we saw above, one who attends to beauty and is drawn by it can catch a glimpse of this unity, if only in the suddenness of a moment in which it opens before one as the event of being and the event of language.

I would even go so far as to suggest that the source of community lies in what cannot be appropriated. Appropriation and domination shut down the otherness that makes dialogue and communication possible. And yet Gadamer insists that to be a linguistic being engaged in the very activity of *logos* that constitutes who we are is to be involved with others in the search for what is held in common. I tried to suggest earlier that this being-in-common, as Jean-Luc Nancy would say, is not a space of sameness but of shared difference, a site of non-belonging that exceeds agency and subjectivity. An example of this can be found in Gadamer's discussion of *Bildung*. Belonging to a culture develops out of shared memories, but this community of memory requires not some sort of universal repository into which we all tap, but rather engagement. As James Risser argues: "This idea of participation that does not erase the difference in the voice of the other necessarily structures hermeneutic *Bildung* in terms of an idea of community - not as a commonality under a concept of identity that arises with the formation of a 'we,' but as an exercising or enacting of life together."¹⁸ The life of understanding is inextricably bound to the life

¹⁵ James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 167.

¹⁶ *Truth and Method*, 186.

¹⁷ *Truth and Method*, 556.

¹⁸ *Life of Understanding*, 55.

of the individual haunted by the strange and the life of the community haunted by difference, but this bond that binds us together is also an unbinding that lets us live on.

Interpretation of tradition, like all forms of communication, is about the movement from the self to the other, but I think it is important to emphasize the movement of dialogical hermeneutics that occurs also in the other direction. In other words, it is equally important to highlight the point that self-discovery, even the ongoing process of realizing self-identity, is intrinsically related to what we receive from others. Nowhere is this point more evident than in our experience of language. Language, speaking, is the means through which we express ourselves and say who we are, and yet language comes to us from beyond ourselves and from our belonging together with others. Self-understanding requires self-transcendence, going beyond the self and inhabiting a site of non-belonging, the site of the between, the shared space of communication. It is a dwelling in incompleteness and openness to the other that embraces the finitude of the human condition. The human being has an identity that is never complete, isolated and closed off. I find this implication of Gadamer's philosophy of self particularly compelling. We are of course as human beings always anxious about our identity, but we often think that achieving self-identity requires that we close ourselves off from others in order to be autonomous and independent of what is outside ourselves. For Gadamer, this closure and enclosure of oneself, this placing of fences and borders around one's territory in order to assert one's identity, is wrongheaded, whether it be about how to be a person or a people. Identity is only achieved in openness and non-closure. Gadamer's hermeneutic notion of communication and being-in-common is not at all about a closure of borders or fusion of identities or anything like a melting pot theory of participation in community; this model of community is based on the notion that identity requires a unity and oneness that denies plurality. But a unity without plurality and possibility and multiplicity is the death of community. For that matter, it is an empty notion of unity because it destroys the belonging together and sharing in common that is the genuine meaning of unity. Being in common presupposes not sameness of identity but difference. Only on this condition can care for the other rise above co-dependency and hierarchical structures of domination. This is what Gadamer means by genuine dialogue and open communication and conversation.

Hermeneutics presupposes that the human being is inescapably situated and embedded in the world. At the same time, and as part and parcel of the way we are situated in the midst of things, we are conscious of ourselves and of our being there. If we grasp this aspect of ourselves in the way Gadamer sees it, then we realize that being alongside others in a shared world is essential to who we are. If this is so, then the path to self-discovery is intrinsically connected to our relationship to others, so much so that interpreting ourselves and our world requires openness towards the other as a condition for and even an aspect of self-understanding.

Gadamer can at times seem to push hermeneutics strongly in the direction of commonality and yet he make eminently clear that this emphasis does not preclude otherness, difference and

plurality. What Gadamer shows, for example, in his analysis of play in *Truth and Method*, is that the usual understanding of the whole-parts structure in which the parts only gain meaning by being tethered to the whole is an impoverished sense of community. The one and the two, unity with plurality, make conversation possible because discourse requires that one be ‘there’ together with another. As Gadamer says: “Only when an idea is placed in relation to another does it display itself as something.”¹⁹

A lot of confusion about Gadamerian hermeneutics and his way of understanding how communication across the divide of traditions can arise is due to his unfortunate choice of the word fusion in the term “fusion of horizons.” In my view, Gadamer’s notion of shared horizons is the opposite of a theory of fusion of parts into one. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer says: “Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The 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 moves with us.”²⁰ Gadamer is attempting to think how one can unsettle one’s own prejudices and experience one’s own plurality in coming together with the other in her otherness and how we can enter into a dialogue that can only occur without fusion. It is to respond to the play of life in which the one and the many circulate in a way that overcomes the kind of dualism of subject and object that hermeneutics seeks to overcome. Gadamer’s notion of plural community recasts the one-many problem in a way that avoids the typical tendency towards identity politics and a politics of fusion, and imagines rather a community where the play of the common does not sacrifice its members.

In his article “Culture and the Word,” Gadamer offers two practices that may help accomplish hermeneutic community: forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness frees the past from its irreversibility and reconciliation recovers and rekindles the movement of being-together towards one another. Words of reconciliation empower us to rebind what has become unbound so that we can go on. Gadamer says: “Only by means of reconciliation is otherness, the unliftable otherness that separates one from another, lifted up to the point of a wonderful reality of a life and thought marked by communality and solidarity.”²¹ Forgiveness honors the fact that life is not irreversible nor is it without increase. “That is the only forgiveness that counts, a word that no longer need be said because it has already paved the path from the one to the other, because it has already overcome the discord, the injustice and all that it carries with it, that has

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato’s Unwritten Dialogue,” in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 52.

²⁰ *Truth and Method*, 315.

²¹ “Culture and the Word,” trans. D. Schmidt, in *Hermeneutics and the Poetic Motion*, ed. D. Schmidt. (Binghamton New York: Center for Research in Translation, 1990). 22-23.

divided us, and it has done this by means of that which the word begets."²² For Gadamer, these are the sorts of words through which *Bildung* is accomplished, othering words that free and open.

Gadamer's emphasis on the living tradition and on the way tradition moves forward into new, futural directions has many implications. For Gadamer, hermeneutics relates to tradition in such a way that the past is not simply recovered as a repository that is fixed and determined. Rather it is encountered in the spirit of forgiveness, in the sense that it is no longer treated as and experienced as the complete and definitive reality that fixes and determines the meaning of a culture, but rather the past is released into its generative possibilities and allowed to come alive and be experienced anew in its living truth. In this sense, tradition involves the past in its potentiality as a process of transformation and transmission that is ongoing and unfinished. I am interested in how this transmission operates such that it carries forward into new dimensions what has been before and yet does so in a way that preserves the difference that is the place of the foreign. In the continuity of tradition, there is also a transmission of rupture, and thus otherness that is not overcome or taken up into the sameness of continuity but transmitted as foreign. This is why in *Truth and Method* Gadamer emphasizes the importance of letting go of our prejudices and prejudgments that tend to reify our relationship to the past and preclude our exposure to the foreign. He says: "Only by forgetting does the mind have the possibility of total renewal, the capacity to see everything with fresh eyes, so that what is long familiar fuses with the new into a many leveled unity.... It is not enough to observe more closely, to study a tradition more thoroughly, if there is not already a receptivity to the 'otherness' of the work of art or of the past."²³ Gadamer says that *Bildung*, self-cultivation, becoming educated or cultured, requires "keeping oneself open to what is other - to other, more universal points of view."²⁴ The educated person embraces a general sense of proportion and distance in relation to herself, and hence is capable of being raised above her narrow-minded self to what Gadamer calls universality. Here too I think Gadamer's unfortunate choice of the word universality, like the word fusion and the word infinite that we discussed earlier, as well as the words unity and transcendence, has led to many misunderstandings of hermeneutics. He says: "This universality is by no means a universality of the concept or understanding. This is not a case of a particular being determined by a universal; nothing is proved conclusively. The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated person (*gebildet*) keeps himself or herself open are not a fixed applicable yardstick, but are present to him only as the viewpoints of possible others."²⁵ Despite Gadamer's persistent warnings, it can be difficult to resist thinking of this notion of the universal in terms of tethering the particular to a fixed unchangeable ideal. But this would be the opposite of what Gadamer has in mind. The universal or what he sometimes calls common sense

²² Culture and the Word, 22.

²³ Truth and Method, 15-16.

²⁴ Truth and Method, 16.

²⁵ Truth and Method, 16.

is for him a notion not of fixity but of expansiveness, growth, motility and openness. It is not some pre-given third site that stands above each dialogue partner or each tradition and to which one dialogue partner and another can appeal in order to find common ground and agreement. Rather, it is what allows us to be embedded in our situatedness and the concreteness of our particular lives while at the same time being open to what is other than ourselves, open to challenges from the unfamiliar and foreign that promise to alter our rigid perspective and allow us to grow towards what is beyond the limits of our own being. While Gadamer often employed traditional, metaphysically laden words like the word universal, I hope I have shown that he deployed them in such a way that they are transformed into words that serve community and alterity.