SO WHAT: THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF
PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

> *It is always daybreak. Suspended between the first and*
> *second coming; between prophecy and fulfillment; between*
> *presence and absence; between seeing and not seeing;*
> *between sleeping and waking. The authentic*
> *psychoanalytical epiphany – do I wake or sleep?*
> *Norman O. Brown (218)*

For someone who came to philosophy in search of moral guidance – for whom the

ultimate question is always "How do I decide what to do?" – there is an ever-present

temptation to lose patience with sophisticated conceptual distinctions and demand to

know what difference this all makes. This "difference" is not just pragmatic in the sense

of how can I use these ideas in order to get something done. The demand is for a

transformation which will resolve the uncertainty or anxiety about the "direction" of

one's life or about the way in which one responds to the opportunities or challenges one

faces every day. Even when one does not look for specific answers about moral or

ethical issues, there is a hope that the ideas can produce, if not an epiphany, at least a

clarification of vision which will make it easier to see the most appropriate path to take.

Gadamer is fairly clear about the relationship between philosophy and morality in

a commentary on the philosophy of value espoused by one of his mentors, Nicolai

Hartmann:

> What was it, then, that left me so unsatisfied with Hartmann's rich
>
> and brilliant book on ethics, and how does what Hartmann's incisive study
>
> of value strived to open up look today? Basically it is one and the same

problem than I have pursued since my beginnings. I first encountered it in the pathos with which Kierkegaard's Christian radicalism attacked all "understanding from a distance," both that of speculative philosophy and that of church theology. It was the motif of existential philosophy (which did not exist at the time) that bound me early on to historicity and the heritage of Dilthey. Thus, of necessity, I became aware of the ambiguity of the task of philosophical ethics.

Philosophy possesses no competence to prescribe and becomes laughable when it tries to take on such a role: this scarcely requires proof. The obligatory nature of a moral system receives it indubitable obviousness from customs in force. To offend against them is not really to contest their validity insofar as every justification attempts to deny that the action really offends against them, or to mitigate or excuse it – and that means recognition of the norms is presupposed. The difference between good and evil, positive and negative, is always constitutive for the sense of moral applicability. (Hermeneutics, Religion, & Ethics 107f)

For a soul in search of absolutes Gadamer's scholarly reflections can seem a bit of a cold shower, especially when he follows these remarks by an exploration of Aritstotle's ideas on the grounding of morality or ethics in custom. The ardent idealist has little use for a suggestion that his ideas of right and wrong can only be derived from the customs of the society in which he grew up, especially if he grew up in a society whose customs included the worst kind of racial discrimination and bigotry. Gadamer's

point, of course, is that the idealistic outrage at inhumane and evil customs is itself an expression of a mores or set of social values which is part of a broader tradition within which the evil society exists. The appeal to any moral argument is an appeal to a community of shared values. Tradition in the form of customs and social institutions is the equivalent in a moral realm to tradition in the form of the linguistic and intellectual heritage of any discipline of thought. The engagement with that tradition represented by hermeneutical interpretation has some kind of corresponding equivalent in the engagement with one's inherited social customs in the formation of a moral sensibility. The two may ultimately be aspects of the same engagement with "facticity" required for the development of individuality or "authenticity," although I sense that Gadamer is careful to steer clear of a moralistic interpretation of Heidegger's analysis of Dasein. As soon as it starts to become clear what a slippery eel one has grabbed in an attempt to ground morality or ethics on anything other than custom, one's admiration for Gadamer's ability to use scholarly and historical insights to corral the problem soars once again to a point of intimidation. The fear of course is that in order to have any clue who I am and how I ought to live, I need to understand the entire history of Western culture or even of the human race at least as well as Gadamer seems to. Otherwise I can only observe customs and follow the advice of any number of modern day descendants of Polonius. Perhaps it is a matter of degree, and the achievement of moral clarity is not an either/or proposition, as much as one might wish to be hit by a bolt of light from the sky on the road to Damascus. Philosophical hermeneutics can be read as a description of the never-ending process by which one strives to achieve clarity and a rock to stand on. Such a

reading will, of course, see a moral vision embedded in hermeneutics, and despite the scholarly tone of Gadamer's combination of philology with philosophy I believe an attentive reader will hear breathing in his work a passionate moral vision of the human condition.

The description of "the obligatory nature of any moral system" quoted above seems to invite one serious objection. To say that any violation of customs in fact assumes their validity in some way can seem like sophistry if one imagines not a protest based on a appeal to shared values but behavior which is completely "amoral" and feels no need to justify itself. That it is possible to imagine such behavior seems abundantly clear from any number of characters I have encountered in film and fiction, even if I have been spared contact with their real-world counterparts. I do believe it is possible for human beings to murder without compunction, and the only response we have to such behavior is to brand the individual monstrously evil or mentally ill. In other words he or she is not one of us, and by this judgment we affirm Gadamer's analysis. Any moral system exists only within a community.

This suggests another possible moral dimension implicit in hermeneutics. The concept of a "fusion of horizons" achieved in hermeneutical interpretation seems almost to demand the recognition of an obligation to expand one's own horizons. Certainly the culmination of Dilthey's philosophy involved a clear call to the infinite task of greater understanding and a more inclusive worldview. I think a case can be made for the same thrust in Gadamer's writing, and the moral equivalent of that becomes the ideal of an ever more inclusive community. Certainly Richard Rorty's admonition to "keep the

conversation going" and continually strive for a more inclusive pluralistic society involves such a reading of Gadamer. Rorty's explication of these ideas may seem facile in comparison to the richness and density of Gadamer's thought, but I am inclined to concur with his instincts. There is clearly a passionate moral commitment driving Gadamer's thought, though he would never preach or moralize. It is not who he is and, one senses, he simply is not interested in doing so. He is too engaged by the urgency of thought and dialogue. Consider the way in which he recalls the relevance of the concept of the game in an essay "On the Problem of Self-understanding:"

> This is the context in which I would like to consider the relation of faith
> and understanding. From the theological point of view, faith's self-
> understanding is determined by the fact that faith is not man's possibility,
> but a gracious act of God that happens *to* the one who has faith. The
> concept of knowledge based on scientific procedures tolerates no
> restriction of its claim to universality. On the basis of this claim, all self-
> understanding is represented as a kind of self-possession that excludes
> nothing as much as the idea that something that separates it from itself can
> befall it. It is at this point that the concept of the game becomes
> important, for absorption into the game is an ecstatic, self-forgetting that is
> experienced not as a *loss* of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an
> elevation above oneself. We cannot comprehend this in a unified way
> under the subjective rubric of self-understanding. (Philosophical
> Hermeneutics 54f)

The first thing that struck me as I read "an ecstatic, self-forgetting that is experienced…as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself" was an image of the excitement Gadamer felt as a student in the discussions described in his memoir.  I then immediately imagined what it must have been like to be one of his students.  He is clearly motivated by the experience of achieving an "elevation" which is not a private state of exaltation but a shared understanding, a communal experience.  His whole life appears to have been an expression of a moral commitment to dialogue.  There is no sense of an "obligation" or of  any justification resulting from his engagement with others; there is simply evidence of the desire to achieve this state of being.  I suspect this is what moves him in another essay to cite Euripides:

> In our situation, the meaning of ancient, thoroughly self-evident "realism" is that the experience of supraindividual ontological realities is not to be won from the empirical pride that nominalistically levels everything out. Rather, the Greeks discerned in the being of the universal, the common, and binding, the higher reality of being.  As Euripides simply put it: "To embrace one's friends – that is god ($\alpha\sigma\pi\alpha\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$ $\tau o\upsilon\varsigma$ $\varphi\iota\lambda o\nu\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon o\varsigma$)."
> (Hermeneutics, Religion, & Ethics 16)

Perhaps the closest Gadamer comes to a moral prescription is his use of "should" in the concluding passages of some of his shorter essays:

> Hence language is the real medium of human being.  If we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding, or ever-replenished common agreement

– a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe. As

Aristotle said, man is truly the being who has language. For we should let

everything human be spoken to us. ("Man and Language," Philosophical

Hermeneutics 68)

As early as the prolegomena to his *Logical Investigations* (1900), a certain

ambiguity is present in Husserl's notion of the application of science. If

the application of science were simply the problem of how, with the help

of science, we might do everything we can do, then it is certainly not the

application we need as human beings who are responsible for the future.

For science as such will never prevent us from doing anything we are able

to do. The future of humanity, however, demands that we do not simply

do everything we can but that we require rational justification for what we

should do. In this sense, I agree with the moral impulse that lies at the

basis of Husserl's idea of a new kind of life-world praxis, but I would like

to connect it with the old impulse of an authentic practical and political

common sense. ("The Science of the Life-World", "Philosophical

Hermeneutics 196f)

One of the ways he connects this moral impulse with the impulse of an authentic

practical and political common sense is via his re-examination of Aristotle's concept of

*phronesis*. Often translated as "prudence" or as "practical wisdom," this concept strikes

me as a typical example of the way in which either Aristotle has been misunderstood or

the English translations of his works are misleading. The concept seems to have

connotations of expedience, shrewdness, propriety, reasonableness, circumspection or

discretion – none of which seem to convey in English the sense that Gadamer is able to

bring out in Aristotle's use of it.  As a student I always felt that Aristotle was a

completely uninspired and uninspiring philosopher – even though one of the lecturers

who introduced me to him was Richard McKeon, a widely recognized authority on

Aristotle.  Much of what I read in Aristotle seemed to me to be pointless cataloguing, and

his ethics seemed to me to be reducing the most important aspect of philosophy to

mundane considerations of what society deems appropriate behavior.  At some point later

on I was able to see that what seemed on the surface to be obviousness in the Poetics

concealed pointers to something genuinely profound, but it was only in reading

Gadamer's commentary which was in turn inspired by Heidegger's re-examination of

Aristotle that I began to be able to see beneath the surface of the English translations of

Aristotle's ethical writings.  Needless to say I was relieved to learn that Gadamer himself

felt the tradition had done an injustice to Aristotle.

> The remarkable phenomenological power of intuition Heidegger brought
>
> to his interpretation liberated the original Aristotelian text so profoundly
>
> and strikingly from the sedimentations of the scholastic tradition and from
>
> the lamentably distorted image of Aristotle contained in the criticism of
>
> the time (Cohen loved to say, "Aristotle was an apothecary") that it began
>
> to speak in an unexpected way.  (Philosophical Hermeneutics 201)

Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* is tied to his idea of "common sense" and

Gadamer first introduces it in Truth and Method as part of an introductory discussion of

the "humanistic sciences" and the way in which Vico represents a watershed moment in

the development of the modern attitude towards scientific explanation and humanistic

understanding.  He sees in Vico a genuine appreciation of the classical notion of *sensus*

*communis* and an understanding of the distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis*,

("wisdom" and "practical reason") in Vico's distinction between the scholar and the wise

man.

> The main thing for our purposes is that here sensus communis obviously
>
> does not mean only that general faculty in all men but the sense that
>
> founds community.  According to Vico, what gives the human will its
>
> direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete
>
> universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation,
>
> or the whole human race.  Hence developing this communal sense is of
>
> decisive importance for living.  (Truth 21)

Later he devotes several pages to a description of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*

because he sees in Aristotle's ethical thought a model for the kind of hermeneutics he is

describing.

> …For moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not
>
> objective knowledge – i.e., the knower is not standing over against a
>
> situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he
>
> sees.  It is something that he as to do
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> > Obviously this is not what we mean by knowing in the realm of
> >
> > science.  Thus the distinction that Aristotle makes between moral

knowledge (phronesis) and theoretical knowledge (episteme) is a simple

one, especially when we remember that science, for the Greeks, is

represented by the model of mathematics, a knowledge of what is

unchangeable, a knowledge that depends on proof and that can therefore

be learned by anybody. A hermeneutics of the human sciences certainly

has nothing to learn from mathematical as distinguished from moral

knowledge. The human sciences stand closer to moral knowledge than to

that kind of 'theoretical' knowledge. They are "moral sciences." Their

object is man and what he knows of himself, But he knows himself as an

acting being, and this kind of knowledge of himself does not seek to

establish what is. An active being, rather, is concerned with what is not

always the same but can also be different. In it he can discover the point

at which he has to act. The purpose of his knowledge is to govern his

*action*. (Truth 314)

Once Gadamer has established the universality of hermeneutics, he can return to

Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* for an indication what is possible for ethical philosophy

once it has acknowledged that "it is simply not possible to approach the whole range of

ethical phenomena by starting with the phenomenon of the "ought" in the imperative

form of ethics." (Philosophical Hermeneutics 199f) He points out that there is no concept

of "duty" in Aristotle, no use of the equivalent of "should." (Hermeneutics, Religion, &

Ethics 146) There is no possibility of strictly applying a universal concept to the

particular situation; there is only the kind of moral knowledge which is based in the

particular situation and has in it the shared understanding on which community is based. The awareness of the concrete social dimension involved in *phronesis* is not simply a sensitivity to superficial custom or propriety much less the awareness of what it takes to get what one really wants (as in expediency). It seems to be the awareness of the foundations of the community, a way of being in tune with one's situation. a sensitivity to what society is "about" which can guide one's choices but which can never be fully articulated in concepts. One can, and perhaps must, try to explicate one's moral choices as a way of communicating indirectly or bringing to light in some way the common bond; but such explication, like the explication of a text, is always a work in progress which must be renewed in each new situation.

This is also, perhaps, why there is a classical connection between *eloquentia* and *prudentia*, as Gadamer pointed out in his commentary on Vico. Rhetoric implies a form of verbal communication which involves more than theoretical or scientific knowledge. Properly understood rhetoric and hermeneutics are inseparable.

> And so we see that the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other. There would be no speaker and no art of speaking if understanding and consent were not in question, were not underlying elements; there would be no hermeneutical task if there were not mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together. It is a symptom of our failure to realize this and evidence of the increasing self-alienation of human life in our modern epoch when we

think in terms of organizing a perfect and a perfectly manipulated

information – a turn modern rhetoric seems to have taken.  In this case, the

sense of mutual interpenetration of rhetoric and hermeneutics fades away

and hermeneutics is on its own.  (<u>Philosophical Hermeneutics</u> 25f)

Shedding light on the social bond or evoking a heightened sensitivity to the moral

dimension of life requires appealing to the whole person.  It requires inspiring him or

exhorting him; and it always brings with it the task of distinguishing between

demagoguery and inspiration.  There is a form of "reason" involved in this process, but it

seems to be a very elusive concept.  One way in which Gadamer approaches it is via a

Greek expression, λογον εχειν, commonly understood as "to have proof." It is used

relative to theoretical knowledge, but it is also used in a different sense relative to

practical knowledge:

> Now, there is also a different meaning of λογον εχειν, a moral meaning to
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> which Aristotle consciously alludes, both in the thirteenth part of the first
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> book and in the first and second sections of book VI of the *Nichomachean*
>
> *Ethics*. Λογον εχειν means "to be answerable," and is also used to describe
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> the way one listens to one's father – that is, with respect.  Respect is not
>
> being blindly subject to the will of another.  It is rather participation in the
>
> superiority of a knowledge that is recognized to be authoritative.  To give
>
> respect does not mean acceding to another against one's own convictions,
>
> but rather allowing one's own convictions to be codetermined by another.
>
> In Aristotle this becomes clear precisely in the detailed analysis he

dedicates to the formation of right convictions and thus making right

decisions, which he terms "prohairesis."  Precisely this defines the free

behavior of the practical-moral person who is a citizen of the city.  (Slaves

have no prohairesis.) (Hermeneutics, Religion & Ethics 153f)

Here Gadamer has ventured again into the territory which can lead some

superficial readers to conclude that he is "conservative," and he certainly gives

"authority" its due more than Norman Brown, for whom one senses that liberation only

comes with detachment from all authority and the fetishism of the written word which it

entails.  One of the places where this became most visible was in a famous exchange

between Gadamer and Habermas, who criticized Truth and Method from the point of

view of a concept of modernity and the goal of total transparency in communication.

Gadamer responded essentially by indicating that Habermas had failed to understand the

universality of hermeneutics.

The unavoidable consequence to which all these observations lead is that

the basically emancipatory consciousness must have in mind the

dissolution of all authority, all obedience.  This means that unconsciously

the ultimate guiding image of emancipatory reflection in the social

sciences must be an anarchistic utopia.  Such an image, however, seems to

me to reflect a hermeneutically false consciousness, the antidote for which

can only be a more universal hermeneutical reflection. (Philosophical

Hermeneutics 42)

The issue here is, of course, the nature of "prejudice" in hermeneutics. Gadamer sees a dogmatism underlying Habermas's critique:

> But does this mean that we "understand" only when we see through pretexts or unmask false pretentions? Habermas's Marxist critique of ideology appears to presuppose this meaning. At least it seems that the true "power" of reflection is evident only when it has this effect, and its powerlessness when one would remain occupied with the supposed phantom of language and spin out its implication. The presupposition is that reflection, as employed in the hermeneutical sciences, should "shake the dogmatism of life-*praxis*." Here indeed is operating a prejudice that we can see is pure dogmatism, for reflection is not always and unavoidably a step towards dissolving prior convictions. Authority is not *always* wrong. Yet Habermas regards it as an untenable assertion, and treason to the heritage of the Enlightenment, that the act of rendering transparent the structure of prejudgments in understanding should possibly lead to an acknowledgement of authority. Authority is by his definition a dogmatic power. I cannot accept the assertion that reason and authority are abstract antitheses, as the emancipatory Enlightenment did. Rather, I assert that they stand in a basically ambivalent relation, a relation I think should be explored rather than casually accepting the antithesis as a "fundamental conviction." (Philosophical Hermeneutics 32f)

Gadamer comments on Aristotle's ideas about natural law in a way that addresses the difficulty of saying exactly how reason functions in morality.

> The special question of natural law, which Aristotle answers in extenso, does not as such interest us here, except by reason of its fundamental significance. For what Aristotle shows here is true of all man's ideas of what he ought to be, and not only of the problem of law. All these concepts are not just arbitrary ideals conditioned by convention, but despite all the variety of moral ideas in the most different times and peoples, in this sphere there is still something like the nature of the thing. This is not to say that the nature of the thing – e.g., the ideal of bravery – is a fixed standard that we could recognize and apply by ourselves. Rather, Aristotle affirms as true of the teacher of ethics precisely what is true, in his view, of all men: that he too is always already involved in a moral and political context and acquires his image of the thing from that standpoint. He does not himself regard the guiding principles that he describes as knowledge that can be taught. They are valid only as schemata. They are concretized only in the concrete situation of the person acting. Thus they are not norms to be found in the stars, nor do they have an unchanging place in a natural moral universe, so that all that would be necessary would be to perceive them. Nor are they mere conventions, but really do correspond to the nature of the thing – except

that the latter is always itself determined in each case by the use of moral

consciousness makes of them. (<u>Truth</u> 320)

Gadamer also re-examines Kant's ideas about freedom and the categorical

imperative in the light of what both Aristotle and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy have said about

moral consciousness.  His conclusion strikes me as the best summation of what

philosophical hermeneutics has to offer someone struggling for moral certainty.

> …Thus in Kant, as in Aristotle, it is not a matter of grounding
>
> moral obligation conceptually through theoretical reflection.  Morality and
>
> ethics do not require exceptional intellectual talents or a capacity for
>
> highly educated thinking.  What, then, can possibly legitimate
>
> philosophical reflection's claim to be of practical advantage to human
>
> moral existence, as philosophy still plainly maintains?  The answer lies in
>
> the fact that people always already subordinate their concrete decisions to
>
> general goals – though usually rather unclearly – and thus they are
>
> engaging in practical philosophy.  This explains what right thinking
>
> should be. Kant's *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*, we see offers
>
> an answer to this question.
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> Aristotle was well aware of the fact that practical philosophy can
>
> do nothing but pursue the drive toward knowledge and self-understanding
>
> that is always manifesting itself in human actions and decision: it can do
>
> nothing but raise vague intuitions to greater clarity – as aiming toward a
>
> particular point helps the archer hit the target (*Nicomachean Ethics A* 1,

1093a23f.) or through more exact analysis of a goal already known to one

(*Eudemian Ethics A* 2, 1214b11). (<u>Hermeneutics, Religion & Ethics</u> 150f)

Just as hermeneutics works within a shared understanding which forms the basis for any human community, there is also a sense that what is shared is a sense of the unity of nature or the cosmos. While philosophical hermeneutics may never be comfortable with the kind of messianic vision that emerges when Owen Barfield lowers his defenses and give expression to his understanding of the meaning of Anthroposophy, it is suggestive to me of what the religious implications of hermeneutics might be.

Barfield left no room for doubt about the urgency of "saving the appearances." This phrase was the common translation of a Greek phrase used by Simplicius in a commentary on Aristotle and was generally associated with the need for theories in astronomy to account for the movement of the heavenly bodies. For Barfield it connotes the use of imagination to recover in a new form the participation in phenomena which was the basis of knowledge for the Greeks.

> Now in considering future possibilities there are, it has been suggested, two opposing tendencies to be taken into consideration. On the one hand, a further development in the direction, and on the basis, of idolatry; involving in the end the elimination of those last vestiges of original participation, which…survive in our language, and therefore in our collective representations. On the other hand, there is the impulse, rudimentary as yet, of the human imagination to substitute for original participation, a different kind of participation, which I have called 'final'.

This, we saw, is based on the acceptance  (mainly impulsive so far, but occasionally explicit) of the fact that man himself now stands in  a 'directionally creator relation' to the appearances.  It would seen that the appearances are in danger from both quarters, and that they will require 'saving', in a rather different sense of the term from that used of old by Simplicius.

The plain fact is, that all the unity and coherence of nature depends on participation on one kind or the other.  If therefore man succeeds in eliminating all original participation, without substituting any other, he will have done nothing less than to eliminate all meaning and coherence from the cosmos.  We have seen that here and there he is already beginning an attempt to eliminate meaning – that is, a valid relation to nature – from his language, and therewith striking at the very roots of his collective representations.  Less sensationally, but far more effectively and over a much wider area, his science, with the progressive disappearance of original participation, is losing its grip on any principle of unity…There is no 'science of sciences'; no unity of knowledge.  There is only an accelerating increase in that pigeon-holed knowledge by individuals of more and more about less and less, which, if persisted in indefinitely, can only lead mankind to a sort of 'idiocy' (in the original sense of the word) – a state of affairs, in which fewer and fewer representations will be collective, and more and more will be private, with the result that there

will in the end be no means of communication between one intelligence and another.

The second danger arises from final participation itself. Imagination is not, as some poets have thought, simply synonymous with good. It may be either good or evil. As long as art remained primarily mimetic, the evil which imagination could do was limited by nature. Again, as long as it was treated as an amusement, the evil which it could do was limited in scope. But in an age when the connection between imagination and figuration is beginning to be dimly realized, when the fact of the directionally creator relation is beginning to break through into consciousness, both the good and the evil latent in the working of imagination begin to appear unlimited.

…Even if the pace of change remained the same, one who is really sensitive to (for example) the difference between the medieval collective representations and our own will be aware that, without traveling any greater distance than we have come since the fourteenth century, we could very well move forward into a chaotically empty or fantastically hideous world. (Saving 145f)

The "world" and "nature" are for Barfield the ultimate reality of our collective representations. There is then for Barfield the possibility that the environment in which we live will change not just because of the way in which it is physically altered by technology at work, but because of the way in which the imagination represents it. In

some way what is "real" is what we "imagine" as we interact with whatever is given to us. As consciousness evolves to the point where it is separated from the original participation which gives rise to it, there emerges a dangerous degree of freedom.

> The appearances will be 'saved' only if, as men approach nearer and nearer to conscious figuration and realize that it is something which may be affected by their choices, the final participation which is thus being thrust upon them is exercised with the profoundest sense of responsibility, with the deepest thankfulness and piety towards the world as it was originally given to them in original participation, and with a full understanding of the momentous process of history, as it brings about the emergence of the one from the other. (Saving 147)

The appeal to thankfulness is reminiscent of Heidegger's later writings, and it perhaps represents a point of contact with Gadamer's hermeneutics. One of the intriguing things about reading Gadamer is the way in which he seems able to do justice to theological ideas without lapsing into dogma or theology. In my own attempts to use philosophy to salvage what I felt might be of genuine value in my adolescent religion, I gravitated towards a phenomenological approach to religion, without knowing to apply such a label to it. I did read Rudolph Otto's The Idea of the Holy so I had a formal introduction to the phenomenology of religion without knowing its name. What seemed paramount to me was understanding truly religious experience as opposed to a search for security in the form of a ready made dogmatic belief system. I thought I saw glimmers of this in Heidegger, especially in his commentaries on Hölderlin; but I doubted that

anything I had experienced personally qualified as a "religious experience."  If asked whether I believed in God, my instinctive initial response was it depended on what is meant by "God."  This is perhaps an early indication of a rudimentary openness to the offerings of philosophical hermeneutics, whose principle architect could say:

> Such "humanistic" experience of the divine is perhaps most compellingly expressed in Hölderlin's poetry.  That it does not do justice to the Christian conception of God cannot be ignored.  Yet, when modern philosophy begins to entrust itself to the ancient path of thought, perhaps thinkers will learn once more to discern the ancient content of the concept of God. (Hermeneutics, Religion & Ethics 17)

For years I had thought (or fantasized) about the presence of "the divine" in human life, and yet it never really occurred to ask myself exactly what I thought "the divine" connoted.  It is perhaps easy to imagine the anticipation with which I began reading Gadamer's essay "On the Divine in Early Greek Thought."  What I discovered, of course, was not a transformative revelation which resolved all the tensions of my emotional and spiritual life, but a scholarly philological exploration of some aspects of the connotations of *το θειον* culminating in a modest conclusion:

> To return to the inner connection between self-movement and self-relatedness or –differentiation: by beginning with the *Charmides* in my essay "Vorgestalten der Reflexion" (see note 11) I have been able to establish a few things that shed new light particularly on the speculation about nous beginning with Anaxagoras.  The present inquiry has, I

believe, gone further in showing that the connection between being and

life always plays a part in the philosophical thought of the Greeks.

(<u>Hermeneutics, Religion & Ethics</u> 57)

That my fevered anticipations were somewhat cooled is in no way a reflection on

the insight and substance of the essay.  I shall not attempt here to follow Gadamer in his

explication of being and life and the way in which concepts in Plato and Aristotle were

related to earlier ideas of the divine.  What matters is that Gadamer found his own way to

access how the Greeks experienced the unity of the cosmos and the connection between

thought or language and "what is."  What matters even more is that this connection may

be vitally important to a sense of "who" one is or how we must live.

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