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Cynthia R. Nielsen
University of Dallas, USA
ORCID: 0000-0003-0971-7633
e-mail: cynthia.nielsen@gmail.com

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The Hermeneutics of (Im)politeness: A Gadamerian Perspective

Introduction

Hermeneutics, especially as Hans-Georg Gadamer articulated and practised it, involves dialogical engagement, a back and forth "play" (*Spiel*) among interlocutors. The term "interlocutor" must be understood broadly to include not only humans, but also texts, works of art, non-human animals, and the natural world. As we know from reading Plato's texts, dialogues can take various and unexpected turns, depending upon the situation as well as the attunement and openness of the dialogue partners to the subject matter (*die Sache*). Gadamer, who of course knew Plato's texts well, takes up the notion of openness to the other and develops it into what one might call a key hermeneutic virtue. In other words, in order to hear the other's claim – whether issuing from a work of art, text, or human other – one must be open to what the other has to say, to the other's claim. Thus, there is a certain comportment and attunement that one must embody and embrace in order to enter into a fruitful dialogical engagement. In this sense, hermeneutics exhibits a politeness of sorts, especially if we consider the Latin terms, *politus* and *polire,* from which we derive our English term "polite," and which imply the notions of being refined and polished. Hence, to act in a polite manner is in some sense to exhibit a refinement, which often comes through a process of training, struggle, or even suffering. To be open to the other is, on the one hand, to exhibit a refinement gained through experience (*Erfahrung*)

in that one demonstrates respect for the other in a genuine willingness to listen to and hear the other's position, address, or challenge. On the other hand, given that refinement presupposes experience – i.e. hermeneutical experience – such refinement and expansive "seeing" comes *through* dialogical engagement with the other, where the other's claim has been understood differently and a broader perspective achieved.

But it is also the case that hermeneutical dialogue involves elements of *im*politeness. Consider, for example, Socrates's opening dialogue with the elderly Cephalus in the *Republic.* He rather directly and perhaps even rudely asks Cephalus how it feels to be so old and nearing death! Why did Socrates engage with Cephalus in such an abrupt manner? One possible answer is that the question has such ultimate significance. That is, as book ten of the *Republic* suggests, the choices we make and how we live our lives in relation to others matter. In other words, sometimes the subject matter and situation demand a direct, impolite approach in order to provoke a thoughtful, self-reflective response – a response that just might awaken us to a new way of seeing others, the world, and ourselves. In this chapter, we explore what it might mean to speak of a hermeneutics of (im)politeness, and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics will serve as our principal dialogue partner.

Polite Hermeneutical Engagement

What comes to mind when we imagine a *polite* hermeneutical engagement or dialogical encounter? Perhaps we imagine an orderly exchange among individuals, ornamented at the appropriate times with the expected gestures and social graces of a particular culture, discipline, and/or form of life. Or perhaps we still regard an exchange as "polite" when the conversation has snags, road bumps, and a few harsh words here and there, so long as when it is all said and done, the two conversation partners can walk away with no hard feelings or even have a drink together. Both descriptions of dialogical encounters might qualify as polite interactions in the mundane sense, but do they qualify as genuine *hermeneutical* engagements as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer?

If we follow Gadamer's train of thought, thinking with and even beyond him, the answer is no. After all, we have many pleasant and non-combative exchanges with multiple individuals throughout the day, and most likely few of them amount to anything more than idle chatter or utility conversations entered into simply to accomplish a particular task. For example, I call my insurance agent to check on the status of my claim from a recent automobile accident. In the course of our phone conversation, I am put on hold for twenty minutes, transferred to three different individuals, and have to explain my reason for calling three different

times. I can decide to scream at the person on the other end of the phone and demand that he or she process my claim in a more timely fashion or else lose me as a customer. Or I can decide to interact calmly, interjecting periodically fitting social pleasantries and then end the call with the standard "thank you; have a nice day." The latter exchange is no doubt more polite in the ordinary sense, less jarring, emotionally controlled, and so forth, but it is possible that relatively little understanding, much less hermeneutical understanding, has occurred through the exchange. That is, perhaps I still have no idea as to when my claim will be processed and my car finally repaired. I have engaged the other with a certain level of respect by listening to what s/he has to say; however, my horizon has not been enriched or expanded. Nor do I have new or increased self- or world understanding.

One might object to this imaginary exchange by pointing out that this particular example is not especially helpful: after all, who expects to gain greater self-understanding through a utility-oriented conversation with an automobile insurance agent? Fair enough. Let's consider another, more relevant example. Imagine that you, a 21st-century American, are at a family gathering and the topic of healthcare in America comes up. The majority of your extended family members are those who support a proposal that will result in millions of Americans losing their health insurance. You decide to enter the conversation, stating various objections to their claims and so forth. However, because it is a family gathering, you decide not to push too hard and opt for a non-confrontational tone and approach. Both sides make civil comments back and forth, but neither side presses the matter so that the actual issues can be set forth and debated. Here again, very little *hermeneutical* dialogue takes place. Instead, after a few minutes of polite interchanges, you decide to change the topic, have dessert and coffee, and go your separate ways. In this example, the subject matter (*die Sache*) – for example, the dignity of human lives or whether healthcare is a right or a privilege that must be earned or bought – is significant, as it involves core aspects of a person's way of seeing and being-in-the-world. Yet because neither side is willing to enter deeply into the subject matter – as neither is willing to risk disrupting the family gathering or cause a scene – the kind of back-and-forth interplay that constitutes a Gadamerian dialogue fails to {take place?}take flight. Clearly, a polite conversation about significant matters can occur without bringing about hermeneutical understanding or genuine dialogical engagement.

Our examples suggest that in Gadamer's notion of authentic hermeneutical dialogue, openness to listen to and hear the other, is *not* simply an act of engaging in social decencies, of being as we commonly say "polite." Rather, openness has to do with one's respect for the alterity of the other, one's willingness to entertain what is foreign, strange, or even an

affront to one's own perspective and beliefs. Such an orientation or comportment toward the other in no way indicates that one must agree with the other's position. As Gadamer explains, "what another person tells me, whether in conversation, letter, book, or whatever, is generally supposed to be his own and not my opinion; and this is what I am to take note of without necessarily having to share it."[1] Although Gadamer's position is frequently presented as requiring that the two (or more) parties must come to some agreement in viewpoints in order for a *successful* hermeneutical dialogical exchange to occur, such a claim is a misrepresentation of his view. For Gadamer, each individual is conditioned by his or her historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context. Consequently, we project various assumptions, prejudgments, and fore-meanings onto our dialogical interactions, whether these involve a human being, a text, an artwork, a non-human animal such as a family pet, or even natural entities such as the Swiss Alps or a white rose bush whose flowers are in full bloom. However, these fore-meanings are *socially* shaped and are not simply one's individual, subjective preferences. Nor are such horizons, which include various presuppositions, fore-meanings, biases, and ways of seeing, *fixed* horizons. Rather, they are dynamic and constantly open to change and revision. In other words, for a hermeneutical dialogue to take place, one need not (nor can one) somehow eradicate all of one's prejudgments and fore-meanings and find some imagined "neutral" starting point. As Gadamer explains, what is required is that "we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our meanings or ourselves in relation to it."[2] Instead of stripping away or attempting to neutralize or negate our horizonal framework and assumptions, we must "lean into" them in the sense that we foreground them and make them known. Stated otherwise, we come to an awareness of our prejudgments, biases, and projected meanings in so far as such awareness is possible. In this way, we allow the alterity of the text or human dialogue partner to challenge us, to speak and "assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."[3] When we are open to the otherness of the text, artwork, human, or (non-human) natural other, we put our presumed understanding at risk, which means that we are genuinely open to correction and to the possibility that our position or beliefs are wrong or mistaken. Such openness to the other through the foregrounding of our prejudgments and a willingness to genuinely risk – and even

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., transl. and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 268 (Henceforth, TM).

[2] Gadamer, TM, 268.

[3] Ibidem, 269.

give up if necessary – one's own views can be understood as demonstrating a hermeneutics of politeness. But as we've noted, politeness in this context is not reducible to exhibiting social graces in a conversational exchange. Politeness as it relates to hermeneutics is more the idea of an orientation or comportment toward the other that facilitates the possibility of one's presumed views being challenged so that one's horizon might be enriched and expanded. It is an orientation that respects the other's otherness and demonstrates that respect in the act of genuine listening.

Another fruitful avenue for discussing hermeneutical politeness is to relate it to what Gadamer calls "tact," which he characterizes as follows: "By 'tact' we understand a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice. Hence an essential part of tact is that it is tacit and unformulable."[4] His discussion of tact falls within a section on *Bildung*, which is variously translated as culture (as in cultivation), formation, or education. Although Gadamer has been criticized by certain scholars who claim that he is advocating a particular bourgeois conception or ideal of education or culture, such a conclusion fails to take note of important distinctions that Gadamer makes.[5] As Nicholas Davey explains, Gadamer distinguishes "between *Bildung* (a specific culture form) and becoming *gebildet* (a process of educative formation)."[6] One may concede that Gadamer perhaps is not as explicit as he could have been in his account of *Bildung*; nonetheless, given his emphasis on hermeneutical openness and his understanding of experience as a capacity for being receptive to new experiences, to conclude that he promotes a specific bourgeois ideal of *Bildung* simply makes no sense. Not only does hermeneutic understanding result in seeing a text, work of art, or one's world anew, it also involves "the development of a practice, of a preparedness or skill in changing mental perspectives. The nurturing of such preparedness is an integral element within the refinement of a hermeneutic discipline. The formation of these virtues is what is meant in part by *Bildung*."[7] In addition, Gadamer stresses the process of educative formation that one obtains through being involved, engaged, and shaped by cultural discourses and practices. This is what Gadamer means by having become cultured, educated, or as the German reads, *gebildet.* Thus, for Gadamer, *Bildung* is a complex notion, a constellation of ideas. It involves "a sense of the other and {the?} different, of history and tradition, of ethical dependence, of the transcendent with-

[4] Ibidem, 16.

[5] See, for example, Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 96–97.

[6] Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding. Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 44.

[7] Ibidem, 37.

in both language and cultural formation as well as an acute experiential awareness of the finitude of one's hermeneutic horizons."[8] Of course, to have *Bildung* or to be or become cultured assumes that one has some familiarity with a specific culture's cherished texts, social discourses, and significant shared practices. However, simply having knowledge of central texts and discourses or a certain level of skill in the relevant practices in no way guarantees that one is or will become *gebildet*. In other words, becoming *gebildet*, and the tact that one acquires through hermeneutical engagement and experience, is more a sensibility or knowledge by acquaintance than a specified procedure that one repeats for predictable results. Consider the following musical analogy. An experienced jazz musician may have had formal training in music theory, or perhaps she learned music theory on her own through various textbooks. However, her ability to improvise well with other musicians is not reducible to her knowledge of scales, chords, or rhythmic patterns. Rather, her immersion in – her dwelling with – the jazz tradition and its masters, as well as her own experiences of playing successfully and unsuccessfully with others, brings about a sensibility and creative responsiveness that cannot be taught via a set of rules. Through listening to how Miles Davis answers Bill Evans' harmonic alterations on the piano, a budding jazz improviser may pick up a creative melodic idea that contravenes the standard music theory account of what should be played over a specific harmonic progression. Davey applies a similar line of thought to hermeneutical engagement with literary and philosophical texts and the tact that an experienced, cultured, and educated hermeneutician displays.

> The process of 'becoming cultured' does not involve the acquisition of predictable responses to known problems, but the accumulation of sufficient practical experience within a discipline so as to offer a spontaneous and yet informed response to a question permitting it to be grasped in a new and unanticipated way.[9]

In the light of these comments, perhaps we could say that hermeneutical tact or politeness is an acquired socially and historically shaped sensibility for dialogical, improvisational engagement. If this sketch is correct, then listening to the other and responding with tact and (hermeneutical) politeness is a thoroughly creative and potentially transformative endeavor.

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[8] Ibidem, 38.
[9] Ibidem, 39.

Gadamer's Engagement with Hegel

At this point, a transition to Gadamer's engagement with Hegel's thought is helpful in order to gain a better understanding of what Gadamer means by "experience." Those familiar with Gadamer's work know that Hegelian overtones sound throughout *Truth and Method* and are likewise heard in many of his later writings. A brief analysis of Gadamer's critical and constructive interaction with Hegel will reveal the latter's contribution to the development of Gadamer's own articulation of hermeneutical experience.

One important and appealing aspect of Hegel's view of experience is that, as Gadamer observes, "experience [for Hegel] has the structure of a reversal of consciousness and hence it is a dialectic movement."[10] One need only recall the famous lord and bondsman or master/slave portion of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to grasp the gist of this dialectical reversal. For our purposes, I will simplify and focus on two aspects of Hegel's account. First, the encounter between the two consciousnesses involves struggle and risk – in fact, everything, even their very lives are at stake. Second, once the relations of master and slave are established, it appears that the master has the upper hand. However, a reversal occurs in which the slave is able to gain his independence and selfhood. That is, through his labour the slave has learned to in-form the material realm, producing lasting artifacts, and this process enables him to come to see his own independence. Setting aside the violence, the eradication of difference, and other problematic aspects of Hegel's account, following Gadamer we foreground the necessary risk involved, as well as the reversal and upsetting of experience – that is, the negation of experience that brings about new experience. It is not difficult to understand the risk at play in Hegel's depiction of the struggle between the two consciousnesses: they are required to risk their lives. Although the risk highlighted throughout the present chapter does not demand that one literally put one's life on the line, nonetheless risk is required for genuine hermeneutical encounters. If one is not willing to risk that one's beliefs may be corrected or shown to be false or misguided, then one cannot enter into the play, the back-and-forth of hermeneutical dialogue.

There are, of course, important differences between the two thinkers. As Gadamer explains, for Hegel "the dialectic of experience must end in that overcoming of all experience which is attained in absolute knowledge – i.e., in the complete identity of consciousness and object. We can now understand why applying Hegel's dialectic to history […] does not do justice to hermeneutical consciousness."[11] According to

[10] Gadamer, TM, 354.
[11] Ibidem, 355.

Hegel, experience is something to be overcome or surpassed, as experience and knowledge are ultimately at odds in Hegel's system. To quote Gadamer: "experience itself can never be science."[12] In contrast, experience in the Gadamerian sense tends to beget more experience because one has learned to value remaining open to other perspectives and possibilities and to accept the limitations of one's own ever-partial and incomplete understanding.

Gadamer's critique of Hegel's notion of experience ends with the former's memorable description of the experienced person as "radically undogmatic," or as we might intimate, "radically refined." As Gadamer explains, when the hermeneutician calls a person experienced, she does not mean to imply that this person already possess all that must be known or that she knows better or more than others.

> Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment, not in definitive knowledge, but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.[13]

In short, for Gadamer experience does not have a final culminating terminus, a something better that serves as its ultimate *telos.* Experience is ongoing: it is always being had and having us if we remain open to the other's address. Of course, what we have said thus far only presents a mere outline of Gadamerian experience; other aspects of hermeneutical experience will be addressed in the following sections.

Impolite Hermeneutical Engagement

If what we have outlined at least gestures toward a hermeneutics of politeness, then it seems that a hermeneutics of impoliteness would entail a lack of respect for the other, a being-closed to the other's views and rigidly fixed in one's owns views. For example, Gadamer understands dialogical encounters with texts, human others, and artworks as involving a back-and-forth play (*Spiel*), wherein a multiplicity of possible meanings may emerge. However, this multiplicity of possible meanings does *not* mean that any meaning will do. As Gadamer explains, "if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various

[12] Ibidem, 355.
[13] Ibidem, 355.

expectations of meaning. […] *The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things*."[14] In other words, if one simply refuses to hear the other and stubbornly (and even violently) imposes one's own meaning upon the text, artwork, or human other, a *dialogical* hermeneutical engagement simply will not "get off the ground." The play of which Gadamer speaks requires a back-and-forth movement among *different* voices. If one partner stubbornly or rigidly imposes her fore-meanings on the other, the result is a monologue, not a dialogue. Moreover, Gadamer describes philosophical hermeneutics as a task, an ongoing, lifelong task that involves constant listening to others and regular questioning of oneself. As Gadamer goes on to say, "a person trying to understand a text [or human other] is prepared for it to tell him something. This is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity."[15]Again, this hermeneutical sensitivity or orientation involves not a bracketing of one's horizon and fore-meanings, but rather demands that one expose and make evident (in so far as one can) one's biases and assumptions. This kind of open-and-exposed approach creates the possibility for the other's voice to sound and be heard "in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's fore-meanings."[16] One must, so to speak, hold one's views somewhat loosely, which is not to suggest that one should be willing to give them up uncritically or flippantly. To dogmatically claim to know the truth and thus be unwilling to put one's own fore-meanings and assumptions at risk is both a mark of hermeneutical impoliteness and a lack of hermeneutical experience.

The Event-Character of Experience (*Erfahrung*) and Understanding

For Gadamer experience (*Erfahrung*) and understanding are intimately related. Importantly, understanding is more an event or happening than something one brings about by following a method or adhering to a specified set of rules. Additionally, as Jean Grondin observes, the experience of truth is more *being* than knowing. That is, its event-like character often takes us by surprise, and surprise, as we shall see is an essential element of Gadamer's notion of experience. Gadamerian experience is like the experience one obtains through the sufferings of life, where something unexpected is learned or now *understood* in a way previously unavailable to us. In his discussion of Gadamer's views of both experience and understanding, Grondin provides the following apt description:

[14] Ibidem, 269.
[15] Ibidem.
[16] Ibidem.

> [Experience is] what strikes us and becomes part of us, more deeply than any syllogism or analytic argument. […] To understand is not to control, but is a little like breathing or loving: we do not know what sustains us, nor where the wind which gives us life comes from, but we know that everything depends on it and that we do not control anything. We must *be there* to know what it is, and to know that it is being, rather than knowing (italics added).[17]

To have understanding and to be an experienced person are not qualities that one can acquire through a methodical, rule-following process. One is, as it were, led into understanding and made to be experienced. Gadamer describes genuine dialogical conversation in similar terms. That is, we do not direct or conduct a conversation, as if we could control precisely where a conversation might go. Instead, as Gadamer puts it we "fall into conversation" and are drawn by its "spirit,"[18]; the true dialogical conversation takes us where the subject matter leads. Given the event-like character of both understanding and conversation, we might characterize hermeneutical impoliteness as occurring when one dialogue partner rigidly forces the conversation in a particular direction. Here the conversation never gets off the ground, as the subject matter never has a chance to emerge, take flight, and to present itself so that one may be taken up or taken over by its claim.

As we have seen, for Gadamer experience always involves an element of surprise, of being taken aback and pulled up short. Here it is helpful to contrast Gadamer's view of experience with experience as understood in a (modern) scientific key. In the natural sciences, repeatability is crucial to validate experience. Experiments must be carried out according to the scientific method in order to be verified and the conclusions rendered valid. Of course, this understanding of experience characterizes the theory of induction, where a generalization is drawn from an accumulation of experiences. Science's quest for objectivity requires the repeatability of experience via confirming experiments. In his discussion of Gadamer's critical analysis of scientific experience, James Risser remarks:

> Validation, as the test of objectivity in science, is predicated upon the element of self-sameness that is found within the interlocking chain of experiences (and experiments) where a first one confirms the next one and so on. In this Gadamer sees that experience is stripped of its historical

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[17] Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, transl. Kathryn Plant (Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), 20.

[18] Gadamer, TM, 383.

> element, its historicity, its dynamic character of unfolding and undergoing.[19]

Scientific experience's emphasis on self-sameness which serves to confirm its position and validity is, as we shall see, structurally similar to the dogmatic or impolite person's approach to dialogue – an approach that in reality produces a monologue.

Here we should make explicit that Gadamer does *not* reject the claims of scientific experience with respect to the need for confirmation. However, Gadamer wants to draw out an important contrast between Aristotle's and modern science's theory of induction. As James Risser observes, there is an aspect of truth in modern science's claim that experience is "valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience. This is a feature of the general nature of experience that holds true not only for scientific procedure, but also for our experience of daily life."[20] Aristotle would agree with this claim. Yet Aristotle gives a different account of the process of induction from both that of modern science (and our mundane experience.) Here again Risser's explanation is helpful:

> In science, there comes a point in the accumulation of experience at which an abstraction is made to form a general concept for the accumulated experiences. In the concept, there is no longer a need to refer back to the accumulated experiences and to have additional experiences for it. In this way the *telos* of experience is knowledge as the knowledge of the concept. In Aristotle's account of how the unity of experience occurs such that we arrive at the universal (*Allgemeinheit*) of experience – that is, the one that corresponds to the many […] – it is not the case that this universality of experience is identical to the universal of the concept.[21]

Risser proceeds to quote and comment on a passage from book 2 of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (100a15–b14) to which Gadamer's text simply alludes. In the passage, Aristotle distinguishes between what Risser calls "proximate" and "ultimate" universals.[22] The former refers

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[19] James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other. Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 86.

[20] Ibidem, 86.

[21] Ibidem, 86–87.

[22] The passage from Aristotle reads as follows: "When one of a number of logically indiscriminable particulars has made a stand, the earliest universal is present in the soul: for though the act of sense-perception is of the particular, its content is universal – is man, for example, not the man Callias. A fresh stand is made among these rudimentary universals, and the process does not cease until the indivisible concepts, the true universals are established: e.g. such and such a species of animal is a step towards the genus animal, which by the same process is a step towards a further generalization" (*Posterior Analytics* II.100a15–b4 in *Basic Works of Aristotle*,

to the individual perceptions that first enter the soul or mind and begin to accumulate and stand firm. From this persisting accumulation, one can then form an ultimate universal, which functions as a stable, general concept of science. Gadamer wants to interrogate the unity that is produced when the many individual sense perceptions are retained via memory and come to form the unity of experience. For example, he notes that the unity of which Aristotle speaks is no doubt the "unity of the universal." But he goes on to differentiate between (Aristotle's) universality of experience and the universality of science. Highlighting this difference, he states:

> According to Aristotle, it [the universality of experience] occupies a remarkably indeterminate intermediate position between the many individual perceptions and the true universality of the concept. Science and technology start from the universality of the concept. But what is the universality of experience, and how does it evolve into the new universality of the logos? If experience shows us that a particular remedy has a particular effect, this means that something common has been noticed in a number of observations, and it is clear that the actual medical question, the scientific question – i.e., the question about the logos – is possible only on the basis of this kind of observation. Science knows why, for what reason, this remedy has a healing effect. Experience is not science itself, but it is a necessary condition of it. […] Only when the universality found in experience has been attained can we look for the reason and hence begin a scientific inquiry. We ask again: what kind of universality is this? It is obviously concerned with the undifferentiated commonality of many single observations. It is because we retain these that we can make certain predictions.[23]

Memory, of course, plays a role in the resulting unity of both scientific and everyday experience, as well as hermeneutical experience. Yet Gadamer does not want to equate Aristotle's notion of the universality of experience with the universality of the concept or the universality of science. Unlike science, which as Gadamer stated earlier, begins from the universality of the concept, the universality of which Aristotle speaks (and which is more relevant to hermeneutical experience) "is not known in a previous universality," which points us to "the fundamental openness of experience to new experience."[24] In order draw out the aspects that most interest him, Gadamer appeals to Aristotle's example

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ed. by McKeon, 185). Risser's term "proximate universals" corresponds in the passage above to the phrases "earliest universal" and "rudimentary universals." Likewise, Risser's term "ultimate universal" corresponds to what the English translator renders as "true universals."

[23] Gadamer, TM, 350–51.

[24] Ibidem, 351–352.

of the fleeing or retreating army. During a battle, when a retreat has been called for, if one soldier unexpectedly decides to halt and make a stand, and then others begin to follow suit, the retreat ceases and the dispersed many have become a unified one and consequently take up a position of strength and (at least temporary) stability. Although Gadamer does not agree with everything that Aristotle concludes from his example, he nonetheless finds one aspect compelling. The image highlights that experience is an *event* – an event that overtakes us which we do not control, and which moreover has the potential to bring about a new way of seeing and being-in-the-world. Experience happens, as Gadamer observes, "unpredictably, and yet not without preparation, and it is valid from then on until there is a new experience."[25] It is this element of unpredictability and contingency relative to particular observations and circumstances that Gadamer stresses and which he claims is the important takeaway in Aristotle's account. That is, unlike science's emphasis on repetition and confirmation to validate experience and experiments, Aristotle's understanding of experience leaves an opening for our expectations to be unsettled and thus for something new or unseen to emerge. However, this unsettling of expectations, as Risser highlights, produces different results from the setbacks that occur in scientific experiments or procedures in which theories are falsified. The unsettling of (hermeneutic) experience, by contrast, has the potential to expand one's horizon and understanding.[26] Thus, the cancelling or negation of experience has a positive potential, which is not to say that this positive potential – i.e. a new, more expansive way of seeing – will necessarily result in one's greater *contentment*.

As we mentioned in passing above, (hermeneutical) experience as Gadamer construes it is historical and is more about the process than {about?} a permanent result. This dynamic aspect of experience helps us to better understand what Gadamer has in mind when he describes experience, taking his cue from Hegel, as essentially negative. When experience pulls us up short, we are genuinely surprised, even at times shocked; we now see what we took to be the case differently; we see others and ourselves in a new light. Commenting on his understanding of experience, Gadamer writes:

> If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better. Thus the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning. It is not simply that we see through a deception and hence make a correction, but we acquire an [expansive; *weitgreifendes*] knowledge. We cannot, therefore,

[25] Ibidem, 352.
[26] Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 88.

> have a new experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before – i.e., of a universal.[27]

As this passage indicates, experience is productive, rather than *re*-productive and hence merely repeating or confirming what we already believed or assumed to know. When we undergo a genuine hermeneutical experience, our horizons are changed, expanded, and on occasion even radically transformed. The extent to which our way of seeing the world is altered depends upon the significance of the beliefs, assumptions, or meaning-complexes that have been put to the test. One can imagine instances where only slight changes to our horizons occur such as when our initial projected fore-meanings upon a certain literary work are shown to be misguided once we have read the story in its entirety; yet one can also imagine other instances where, for example, one's deeply held religious convictions have been unsettled or even shattered. In the latter case, one's way of being in the world and understanding oneself and others would likely be radically altered. The point that we want to emphasize is that one should not conclude that Gadamer's notion of genuine hermeneutic experience always or necessarily equates to a more pleasant or better *subjective* state although increased understanding of the subject matter is acquired. Genuine hermeneutic experience can be extremely painful, revealing new truths and insights that radically impact one's life. (We will return to a discussion of pain in relation to learning, education, and hermeneutical experience in a subsequent section). Here we revisit our earlier etymological insights, which linked politeness with refinement. The process of refining such as refining one's writing or musical style or refining a precious metal typically involves intensive labour, pain, setbacks, and in no way guarantees a happy ending. One's journey to becoming a more refined musician or playwright may result in a mental breakdown. In a similar manner, the continual, life-long process of refining our biases and expanding our hermeneutical horizons is demanding, as it requires us to risk not only our beliefs and assumptions but also our very selves, who we understand ourselves to be and how we *are* in-the-world-with-others.

Lastly, the openness to the other that characterizes hermeneutical experience indicates that genuine hermeneutical engagement demands, as Davey puts it, an "openness to involvement, to self-discipline, to

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[27] Gadamer, TM, 353 [*Wahrheit und Methode*, 359]. I have slightly modified Weinsheimer's and Marshall's translation of this passage, indicated by the words in brackets. Given Gadamer's opposition to anything like a Hegelian notion of comprehensive knowledge, translating the term, *weitgreifendes*, as "expansive" rather than Weinsheimer's and Marshall's choice of "comprehensive" seems more consonant with Gadamer's thought.

partaking in the hard and sometimes uncomfortable business of negotiation. […] Hermeneutical practice is not easy: it is a practice through which the one who attends to the other, and changes."[28] Here again, by way of contrast, we might describe hermeneutical impoliteness as a refusal to be involved with the other, a refusal to enter into the subject matter and allow it to "speak," challenge, and potentially transform (or perhaps upend and break) us.

Pain, Education (Bildung), and Hermeneutical Insight

Gadamer's conception of experience not only involves an element of surprise and novelty, but also includes pain. As we discussed earlier, Gadamer's account is influenced by both Aristotle and Hegel. The surprise aspect of experience which Gadamer foregrounds is similar to Hegel's emphasis on the reversal of consciousness that takes place in his explication of the master/slave dialectic. Significantly, for both Gadamer and Hegel, a genuine dialectical (Hegel) or dialogical (Gadamer) encounter with the other results in a new way of viewing the subject matter and likewise facilitates a transformation of one's self- and world-understanding. Those dialogical interactions that bring about significant transformations are often painful. That is, to come to see oneself, the other, and the world differently, and hence to realize that one's former way of seeing and being-in-the-world was not only mistaken, but perhaps radically so, can bring about a dizzying despair, angst, and even a sense of homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*). Gadamer's view shares certain resonances with Plato's account of education. For example, in his famous allegory of the cave in the *Republic* Plato highlights the pain involved in education. In fact, Plato's account suggests that the process of education is both ongoing and involves a series of painful events. For example, the prisoner's first glimpse at the fire that produced the shadows on the cave wall results in a disorienting pain, as does his attempt to look at the sun outside the cave. When it comes to education as an ongoing process, Gadamer is closer to Plato than Hegel.

As we have seen, Gadamer also underscores human finitude and our historical character in his elaboration of both experience and education (*Bildung*). Having noted that experience "belongs to the historical nature of man" and that it "inevitably involves many disappointments of one's expectations," Gadamer then links our historical nature to the relation between experience and insight.[29] As he puts it,

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[28] Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 244.
[29] Gadamer, TM, 356.

> the historical nature of man essentially implies a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight. Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that has deceived us and held us captive. Thus insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense. Insight is something that we come to. It too is ultimately part of the vocation of man – i.e., to be discerning and insightful.[30]

So the insight that we come to as a result of (often painful) experience is (or at least can be) liberating; it frees us, like the chained prisoner in Plato's cave, from the bonds that formerly enslaved us to such an extent that our view of the world and ourselves was distorted and narrow. Moreover, Gadamer describes the process of achieving insight as a calling of human beings. To what does this calling call us? It calls us to grapple with and come to accept our limitations, finitude, historicity, and the contingency of our existence. Risser puts it nicely: "experience engenders the insight into contingency, the insight that we are not masters of our own fate."[31] For a variety of reasons, some more intelligible than others, we humans tend to learn this lesson – which, as Gadamer stresses, is to gain insight into what *is* – through suffering.

Gadamer turns to Aeschylus, the celebrated Greek tragedian, often referred to as the father of tragedy, whose major (extant) works include *The Oresteia* (a trilogy consisting of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*), and also *The Persians*, *The Suppliants*, *Seven Against Thebes*, and *Prometheus Unbound.* As Gadamer explains, Aeschylus's works highlight how humans learn through suffering (*pathei mathos*). However, the idea is not simply that suffering can make us wiser, or that through the experience of suffering we come to see that our former views were misguided or the consequence of deception, whether by others or ourselves. Ancient religious thinkers have drawn attention to such truths as part of our human experience. What is important about Aeschylus, as Gadamer tells the story, is that Aeschylus explains *why* humans must learn through suffering: because such learning yields "insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight – the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy."[32] Hence, Aeschylus drives home our human finitude, the hard truth that we are not masters of our fate, that we cannot halt the advance of time, that no matter how hard we try, pray, or hope, we cannot heal the loved one dying before our eyes or slipping into mental oblivion. For Gadamer, the "truly experienced

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[30] Ibidem.
[31] Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 90.
[32] Gadamer, TM, 356–357.

person is one who has taken this to heart," since he "knows that all foresight is limited and plans uncertain."[33] The experienced person has come (through suffering) to accept human finitude (an acceptance which is itself an ongoing process of varying stages and degrees). In contrast with Hegel's idea of progression toward a more perfect knowledge such as that which finally overcomes experience, for Gadamer the experienced person is always becoming, on the way, and in the process of acquiring a capacity for openness to new experiences. Here dogmatism can find no resting place; experience simply will not allow it, because experience reveals to us and makes us accept reality whether we like it or not. Experience teaches us what *is* truly the case about the human condition. In the following passage, Gadamer sums up rather poignantly the key moments of his account of experience as the teacher of finitude.

> Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion. Rather, the person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns. To acknowledge what is does not just mean to recognize what is at this moment, but to have insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to expectation and planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all the expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited. Genuine experience is experience of one's own historicity.[34]

To return to our discussion of hermeneutical politeness and impoliteness, the experienced person, having gained insight through suffering, has learned the foolishness of rigid dogmatism precisely because she has had to grapple with her failures, shattered expectations, exploded horizons – in short, her finitude. Given our account thus far, it seems that the dogmatism of the impolite interlocutor is not only tied to a refusal of the alterity of the other, but also a refusal to accept the reality of the human condition as finite and historically conditioned; we are time's servant; it has us, not the reverse.

Conclusion

Recalling the opening allusion to Socrates's exchange with Cephalus and considering what we've discussed thus far, Cephalus could be said to exhibit one type of hermeneutical impoliteness. After all, Cephalus

[33] Ibidem, 366.
[34] Ibidem, 357.

doesn't really engage Socrates and certainly doesn't enter into the subject matter – i.e. a discussion of the nature of justice – in which Socrates is interested. Instead, Cephalus rests content in his own estimation of himself and what he believes his wealth can achieve for him. As a consequence of his wealth, he has been able to make the appropriate sacrifices to the gods and hasn't had to cheat others; thus, he concludes that he has lived appropriately, justly, and he refuses to call this assumption into question. When Socrates presses him regarding an adequate definition of justice, Cephalus quickly loses interest, hands the dialogue over to his son Polemarchus, and exits the scene in order to carry out his religious sacrifices.[35] What on the surface one might view as Socrates' rudeness or "impoliteness" (understood colloquially) is in fact a gesture toward hermeneutical engagement.[36] However, Cephalus' aloofness and refusal to participate, arrests the conversation, and consequently a genuine dialogical event never occurs. Cephalus remains the same, and Socrates is forced to seek out new dialogue partners. So it seems that a successful hermeneutical encounter does not exclude impoliteness of a certain sort. If Cephalus had entered into the dialogue and put his beliefs about what constitutes a just life to the test, then Socrates' "rudeness" (i.e., his proper impoliteness, understood as direct and frank dialogical engagement) would have served its purpose. This is not to suggest that rudeness is a necessary component of genuine hermeneutical engagement. Each conversation or dialogue will have its own context and circumstances that one must prudentially consider. On the one hand, a frank, impolite approach may be precisely what's needed. On the other hand, depending upon the situation and circumstances, a more subtle, less offensive style might be what is called for. To blur the descriptive boundaries even more, we could also rightly claim that true hermeneutical engagement manifests itself as both polite and impolite. Whichever aspect or angle we emphasize – politeness or impoliteness – it is precisely this lack of method and adherence to a strict set of rules or procedures and an Aristotelian-inspired stress on *phronesis* or practical wisdom that contributes to Gadamer's understanding of philosophical hermeneutics as a dynamic, living, and hopefully lifelong praxis.

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[35] Plato, "Republic", in: Plato, *Complete Works*, ed., with introduction and notes, by John M. Cooper, transl. Georges Maximilien Antoine Grube et al. (Indianapolis–Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 331d4, 976.

[36] As noted in the previous section, another form of hermeneutical impoliteness is manifest in various forms of dogmatism such as when one dialogue partner claims to *already* know how his interlocuter understands the subject-matter and refuses to listen to his interlocuter's rather different account of his own position. In this case the other's alterity is denied, and a monologue, rather than a dialogue, is the result.

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Summary

Central to Gadamerian hermeneutics is dialogical engagement, a back and forth "play" (*Spiel*) among interlocutors. For Gadamer, texts as well as works of art function as interlocutors capable of addressing and making a claim upon us. However, whether engaging a human dialogue partner or a text, one must approach the other with openness, which can be understood as a hermeneutic virtue. Consequently, in order for a fruitful dialogue to occur, one must embody a specific comportment to the other. In this sense, hermeneutics exhibits a politeness of sorts. If one considers the Latin roots (*politus, polire*) from which we derive our English term "polite," relevant connections with notion of refinement and being "polished" emerge. That is, to be polite is in some sense to exhibit refinement, which often comes through a process of training or even suffering. One the one hand, openness to the other involves politeness or refinement in that one demonstrates respect for the other in a genuine willingness to hear the other's view. Such refinement has been achieved through experience (*Erfahrung*) and continues to be achieved through dialogical engagement with others. On the other, it is also the case that hermeneutical dialogue involves elements of *im*politeness, where one transgresses social norms in order to provoke a thoughtful, self-reflective response.

Keywords: Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics, dialogue, openness, hermeneutic virtue, politeness