

Chapter 2 - Research Concepts and Methods

In this chapter I outline the theoretical foundations and methods of the inquiry. I start with a brief introduction to the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer on the subject of philosophical hermeneutics, the happening of understanding in practice. I have engaged with his masterwork *Truth and Method* throughout this study (Gadamer 1993)⁵. I then introduce phenomenology, a philosophy of experience and consciousness, the principles of which underpin my method of action research. I give an explanation of the use of stories from my own experience as the ground for exploring the question of understanding.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics

'hermeneutics is not a doctrine of methods for the humanities and social sciences but rather a basic insight into what thinking and knowing mean for human beings in their practical life' (Gadamer 2004:5).

In this section I give an initial outline of the philosophy of the twentieth century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and explain how his work is relevant to my context and how he has guided my research. In 1960, Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, a detailed philosophical inquiry into the hermeneutical situation and the nature of understanding. It was not published in English until 1975. Even now his work remains less widely known than that of other philosophers of his age, perhaps because his work devalues assertion and promotes dialogue, which gives it a vagueness and lack of finality that for him is deliberate and for others lacks the certainty that our culture has come to admire (Moran 2000:285).

⁵ From now on I will use (TM #) to refer to the relevant page in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition 1993, Sheed and Ward, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall.

Born in Germany in 1900, he lived through the entire century. As a young man he attended Husserl's and Heidegger's lectures and seminars. He was a contemporary of Hannah Arendt and he engaged with Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida and Karl Apel (Dostal 2002b; Moran and Mooney 2002). His work fused phenomenology, hermeneutics and classical philosophy with what I think is beautiful consistency. Insisting on the essential role of tradition in all human understanding, he has been censured for failing to recognise the imprisoning effects of tradition and the need for emancipatory dialogue. He has also been accused of being overly critical of the methods of the sciences (Ormiston and Schrift 1990).

The central conversation of my thesis is with understanding as expressed in Gadamer's writings. I have used his ideas to frame and inform an inquiry into how understanding happens with pastoralists, government officials and development professionals in Ethiopia. While Gadamer concentrates in *Truth and Method* mainly on the relationship between a reader and the subject through a 'traditional or eminent text', I pay attention to conversation – the engagement between people and their subject matter when they are talking to one another. In most respects, as Gadamer himself says, these two hermeneutic situations are the same, even though in a conversation between two people the possibility of clarification of the thing being discussed multiplies the effect: '*in a successful conversation they [the participants] both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were*' (TM 378).

In this section I lay out five aspects of Gadamer's work that have proved central to my own exploration. I consider first his warnings about the limits of scientific method and relate them to the efforts I and others make to be methodical in our development work. Exploring Gadamer's thought on the nature and conditions of insight I then look at his concepts of historicity, the generative aspects of prejudice and the primacy of the question and its qualities of openness. In struggling with the problem of an art of understanding, Gadamer's ideas of openness provide a

potential resolution for me. I spend a little time on openness here to lay the ground for an investigation into what it means in my own experience and practice in East Africa. Finally I make use of Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons: the event and adventure of comprehension and connection. At the end of this series of short introductions I point to how each of these five areas shape the structure of the thesis.

Scientific method

At the end of *Truth and Method* Gadamer notes that '*in a time when science penetrates further and further into social practice, science can fulfil its social function only when it acknowledges its own limits and the conditions placed on its freedom to manoeuvre. Philosophy must make this clear to an age credulous about science to the point of superstition. On just this depends the fact that the tension between truth and method has an inescapable currency*' (TM 552). As I see it, Gadamer rejects the dominant application of methods, used so fruitfully in the physical sciences, to the purposes of life experience, aesthetics and human society. He is concerned that the methods of the physical sciences have been carried beyond their natural territory when they attempt to account for aspects of truth for which they are unsuited. The search for a scientifically respectable methodology of hermeneutics led to a misconception of the nature of understanding. It became for a while an objective result of inspection, rather than an event of living (Lawn 2006:12) (TM 241). Gadamer made a lifelong effort to wrest it back to philosophy.

Gadamer goes on to explain, that while there are arts, techniques and talents involved in the dialogues that are essential to understanding, it is simultaneously true that '*history co-determines the consciousness of the person who understands.*' However much we might try to control the process, what is already understood is already speaking for itself (TM 567). We do not, for example, really 'conduct' genuine conversations, rather the conduct of the conversation lies mostly outside the will of its participants (TM 383). So while we are players in the game of understanding, we are also played by it.

The methods of the physical sciences have colonized and partially obscured the territories of experiential. I take note when Gadamer points out that methods appropriate to the rationalist sciences immunize *'against the experience of common sense and the experience one gains in living'* when they are uncritically expanded into contexts such as the political sphere (TM 555). By common sense, I believe that he means not only a generally held understanding of what is, what works and what matters, but also the sense we have of community and co-operation.

In Ethiopia, an aid-dependent country, government and foreign donor officials will often tell you that they are looking for an appropriate method that will allow them to give their aid and make their policies on the basis of a complete analysis of situations of poverty, economic inadequacy and social injustice. This is development as it is projected in websites, programme plans and meetings such as those of the World Bank and numerous other large organisations – take for example the plan for the \$650 million contribution to Ethiopia's public services (World Bank 2009b). There is little recognition that the parameters of what is measured and corrected are primarily defined by the history of those who do the measuring and correcting. Officials describe how their efforts are undermined by annoyances of practice and politics and the intransigence and backwardness of certain cultures with which they barely communicate. In Ethiopia, as plans and policies come up against ever more perplexing obstacles, as relations between different groups of people become ever more tense, and as our own bureaucratisation intensifies in response to our failures, I find that our analyses seem less and less able to generate coherent and effective responses.

Gadamer's views on method are relevant both to the way I have conducted this inquiry and the way I and my colleagues go about our work. Even if hermeneutics are always at play, we have tried to mask hermeneutic consciousness with a scientific one. In this thesis I will contend that our own search in the development sector for a legitimate scientific method of analysis and intervention has distorted our ability to come to common sense understandings that might just solve the problems we are concerned with.

Historically effected consciousness

We find ourselves in a given tradition, says Gadamer. That tradition, including all that has happened in our own lives, all our environment, all our history, all our language is radically finite (TM 301). It is the ground and hinterland from which we come to understandings with others. We are each possessed by our tradition to the extent that all our thoughts and gestures are in a language that is made possible by it, and all our physical nature is the outcome of it. Thus we always *'already possess an orientation toward, and language for, that which we are trying to understand'* (Warnke 2003:107).

Our historicity, our being beings that are the product of history, determines our consciousness and *'it does so beyond any possible knowledge of this domination'* (TM xxiv). Gadamer claims that the limitations of tradition and prejudice are not obstacles to, but the foundations of understanding. Our prejudgments and concerns anchor what would otherwise be an inchoate infinity of possible perceptions. He uses Husserl's notion of a horizon to explain its possibilities for expansion:

'Every finite present has its limitation. We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of "horizon." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded' (TM 302).

Gadamer intimates that the western idea of progress may have led us to forget the role of tradition in all that we think, speak and are: *'though the will of man is more than ever intensifying its criticism of what has gone before to the point of becoming utopian or eschatological consciousness, the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real'* (TM xxxviii). He means by this, I think, that the task of hermeneutic

philosophy is to keep us acquainted with the vitality of tradition in our lives. Hermeneutic consciousness gives us the humility to allow what has gone before, what we are now, what we encounter and what we will be, to all be true and simultaneously active. We accept that the truths that we work out with others grow from where we have come from in ways suitable to their time and place. An obsession with progress, brought on by the successes of technological sciences and a sense that what is past must be inferior, is in danger of distorting our appreciation of truth and reducing the scope of our insight.

As we become conscious of our situation of historicity and that of everyone and everything else, we become aware of contingency (Warnke 2003:108). If we trace our history, as you will see that I do as part of this inquiry, we will understand it only *'from the position of being already constituted by it'* (*ibid*: 108). The exercise gives us awareness of how history is present with us through the culture, language and environment that is ours. We may then realise that our understanding will always be partial and never objective, and other people will have quite different understandings with perfectly good reasons for them. If our epistemology suggests that we can know all of the truth, then we should suspect it of overstepping its capabilities. We can instead, as Georgia Warnke suggests, *'be open to the possibility that we might change our ways of thinking about the world, our situation and ourselves'* (*ibid*: 109). It means that there are an infinite number of other horizons of understanding out there that we can engage with. The concept opens us to the idea of truly productive conversation with the other and an infinite but grounded future. It is not about making truth relative, but acknowledging that what is true is the thing itself as it is presenting itself, and even with all the rigour we can muster, each of us expresses that truth in slightly different ways every time we express it. There is no standing outside this situation.

When my pastoralist friends, in their own historically effected consciousness, talk of rain at the same level of categorisation as peace, when they repeat the sayings of a prophet, when they know time by the moon, talk of land as if it is as immune from sale as air, or tell me episodes of history marked by generational councils, I notice that I struggle to integrate these versions of reality into my own way of

considering rain, peace, spirit, time, land or history. Likewise government officials from the Ethiopian highlands understand these matters in their own way. They belong to a culture quite different from the culture of the more recently annexed pastoralist lowlands. These differences are not trivial, because they lay the foundation for a series of often perplexing and dangerous disagreements.

What generates the impulse for the state of historicity to reach beyond itself? Thinking on historically effected consciousness and the way it can isolate has fundamental application to my situation within the Ethiopian development scene. Productive conversations relating to issues of life and society have not yet taken place on any scale in the development sector. For me and for the pastoralists with whom I speak, the possibility of productive conversation is an exciting one, especially if it can be extended from internal debates to include neighbouring communities, politicians, government and donor officials, scholars and business people with whom the pastoralists want to have a dialogue. At the moment it seems that our worlds are separate. When we speak to each other it is as if words between us all fall from our mouths into battle trenches of defensive incomprehension and disrespect.

Prejudice

The historical, cultural and normative meanings that we bring to encounters provide the starting point for active hermeneutic interpretation. Gadamer calls this prejudice. He notes that the word prejudice only came to take on its current pejorative connotation with the ideas of the Enlightenment, when European scientists, philosophers and historians sought freedom from any prejudgment through the application of precise methods. But prejudice, says Gadamer, simply means that which we have already judged to be the case and it is neither negative nor positive in itself but a given (TM 270). Prejudice is a standpoint from which we see something, *'not a point from which we are necessarily blinded'* (Wachterhauser 2002:72).

Just as gravity limits the height we can jump, but does not imprison us entirely, instead stimulating us to leap and run, so the limitations of thinking within a

given language or operating within a cultural and normative horizon — think perhaps of modernity or tradition, Europe or Africa — are starting points rather than constraints. There is always something emerging out of and beyond our language and culture, generated by anticipation and encounter with what is real. My history is reinterpreted from the ever changing position of my present, which in turn changes the direction and application of my insight.

We often claim that, in the interests of neutrality or learning, we are putting prejudice aside. But that would be impossible. It would mean trying to exclude that *'which alone makes understanding possible... To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us'* (TM 397). Prejudice is the ground from which questions arise and possibilities for understanding emerge. It offers points of reference for creating new meanings and expanding old ones, and creates a direction for the conversation that follows (TM 295). The process begins when we are addressed and interplay begins as our own prejudice is brought into question at the same time as we question what we are hearing or otherwise encountering. Questions stimulate and form the framework of the understanding that emerges. *'Fore-grounding a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment'* (TM 299).

For Gadamer understanding cannot be confirmation of opinions, it must involve an expansion to a wider horizon. *'How, then, can the admission of ignorance and questioning emerge?'* he asks (TM 366). He answers this in two ways, first in a consideration of the conditions of being open to understanding; second in a consideration of the kind of dialogue that keeps the questions alive so that the matters are kept in play until everyone is satisfied. He talks of the primacy of conversation, *'the art of forming concepts through working out common meaning'* (TM 368).

Though we talk about listening in the development field, we actually do very little of it and instead trade in opinions and promises. In my experience it is usual for professionals in my business to be satisfied with confirmation of their opinions rather than allowing for something new. We achieve professional status by

knowing and being knowing, not by asking endless open questions (Chambers 1997). We claim that we already know, or have found out, and are rewarded for it. Of course, there is a wide variety of views as to what is going on in development, but there is a common tendency towards making claims that we are supposed to be closer to the truth than our predecessors managed to be. We are, as Gadamer says, in a difficult position:

'By understanding the other, by claiming to know him, one robs his claims of their legitimacy. In particular, the dialectic of charitable or welfare work operates in this way, penetrating all relationships between men as a reflective form of the effort to dominate. The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance. We are familiar with this from the teacher-pupil relationship, an authoritative form of welfare work' (TM 360).

Encounter and questioning

In the foreword to the second edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer says, *'the experience of the Thou ... manifests the paradox that something standing over against me asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition; and in that very process is "understood"' (TM xxxv)*. The capitalised "Thou" means another which relates itself to me (TM 358). In concentrating on the encounter with a historical text, whose speaker is from a place impossibly distant from where the reader is now, Gadamer emphasises that it is the otherness of the speaker that enables the text to tell us something. He emphasises too, our continuity with the other in terms of participating in the same world. He notes from time to time in his writings (more and more in his later works) that the same is applicable to conversations and encounters between people, even where the differences are not so apparently unbridgeable. The otherness and connectedness of the Thou are of equal importance in the phenomenon of understanding (TM 358-60).

Examining this process of encounter, Gadamer goes on to say that interpretation of what is there is modified by the degree and nature of the interpreter's openness, even as it is bounded by the possibilities of vocabulary and expectations which emerge from culture, history and purpose. Georgia Warnke

has summarised from his text three conditions for coming to understanding that together can be described as openness. The first is that we are prepared for the other to tell us something – we recognise that it is *other*; the second that we assume the parts of what is said will be consistent with the whole of what is said, so that when we find contradictions we question them and make adjustments to our understanding; and the third, that what we are hearing could be true: *'something different and more satisfying than what we already believe'* (Warnke 2003:111-2). It is from these conditions that questions and dialogue arise.

Just as I appreciate the possibility of your words being right, I must also consider, for the moment, that my version of things might be invalid, or incomplete, so I ask a question (TM 299). In a true dialogue, we both bring our prejudices into play together (TM 298-9). Foregrounding my own prejudice is not something I simply do; rather it is provoked and put at risk by the other and affected by my epistemological stance. Openness arises, it seems, with the wisdom of experience, as provocation becomes something to be expected.

'The perfection of experience, the perfect form of what we call 'experienced' does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. ... The dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself' (TM 355).

Even when a new understanding begins by offering liberating or strengthening insights, as with Freire's emancipatory programme of 'conscientisation' (Freire 1972), the new understanding can become a constricting opinion if openness is not preserved. When an opinion, however it was initially expansive, is reinforced by an environment in which being opinionated is strongly valorised, or in which powers or identity accrue to the holders of the opinion, it can become positively ossifying. Then the hermeneutical process of learning falters.

What is it that keeps openness open? How is it that the truly experienced person will always be open to new experience, because that is what he or she has learned about living? Openness is the art of questioning, says Gadamer: *'the art of questioning is the art of questioning even further, - i.e., the art of thinking. It is called*

dialectic, because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue' (TM 367). While openness to understanding is clearly an ordinary part of being animate and in our case human, I think there are also degrees of achievement related to how we have cultivated our talents, as individuals and societies. Openness is maintained by genuine conversation, whether spoken or silent, gesture, voice, music, image or text; for it is conversation that sustains the interplay of question and answer (Marshall 2004:123).

'We have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the "art" of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possesses this art will himself search for everything in favour of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter) (TM 367).

In development and administrative bureaucracies with which I have engaged there is a risk that conditions of openness will fail and the art of questioning die. In situations where autocratic, economic or bureaucratic rule have replaced communicative agreement to an excessive degree, questions become useless and dialogues stop happening. I have experienced my industry's low tolerance for possibility or mutability. I have found myself having to say that what I am going to do is right and what I have done is right. I have planned and reported in a knowing fashion. Recognition of the autonomy of the other is almost against our principles; I believe that we want everyone to be part of one developmental paradigm. While we often hire in consultants to analyse and recommend, it is usual for any contradictions that emerge to be ignored in a rush for new plans, resources and results (Chambers 1995). The notion that the other, especially the poor and voiceless other, embodies a truth that will enhance our own is seldom recognised, given the power differentials that our wealth and positioning bring us (Chambers 1997).

Fusion of horizons

We are each of us an element of a broad and complex motion of time, making what Gadamer calls a single world horizon of all that has ever been and all that is (TM 245). To live we seek to understand things, we distinguish and connect, and in encounter we project that each of us, each culture, each time in history, each thing that we want to understand and take part in, has a horizon of its own effective history. But these horizons are never truly closed to one another and they are always in motion. *'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'* (TM 304).

The hermeneutic task, Gadamer suggests, consists in not covering up the tension between self and other, past and present or one culture and another by *'attempting a naïve assimilation, but consciously bringing it out'* (TM 306). When we encounter the other we do not transpose ourselves into it, her or him, but make ourselves available. This is neither empathy nor subordinating ourselves. We keep a sense of ourselves and also let the other's meaning be heard (TM 305). But while there is alienation there is also a unity which was and is always there. There is no horizon of the present without a horizon of the past, and there is no horizon of myself here and now, without all the horizons of all the others in the world: *'understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves'* (TM 306). It is a constant business of knitting the distinctions of the world together.

In the fusion of horizons we each assimilate understanding to ourselves and we confirm together the unity of our existence. Each time this happens it is a new event, because each time the making of sense is renewed in a new concrete situation. The moment of interpretation is rooted and influenced by historicity, but is also entirely unique and new. Its limitation is that it has to fit with the speaker's meaning, the listener's prejudice and questions and the moment and place in which it is happening. Each event of effective understanding is a fusion of cultures.

As the historical and cultural horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. This, Gadamer says, is *'the problem of application that exists in all understanding'* (TM 307). By application, he means not that I apply my understanding to something, but that something applies to me. In the early tradition of hermeneutics, understanding, interpretation and application were called *'subtilitas'* – subtleties. They were not so much *'methods we have at our disposal than... talents requiring particular finesse of mind'* (TM 307). Gadamer reminds us that we cannot fix and prescribe processes that are essentially alive. Application suggests that something in the world directs what is understood and is appreciated from the ground of prior understanding. It is the connectivity and unity of understanding with the world and the hermeneutic consciousness that Gadamer speaks of. This consciousness is a life-sustaining capability of dialogue and judgment which we all possess, but recognise to a greater or lesser extent.

I suggest that hermeneutic consciousness is barely appreciated among we who work on social development. My own experience of pre-packaging what I encountered before I encountered it, as being caused by this or that, being useful or useless, meaning this or that, is just one example. This barrier between our own ideas and the actualities of things and people we are dealing with is one of the major concerns of this thesis. It seems reasonable to look for ways of enhancing our talents at noticing and making things noticeable. Subtlety can perhaps be refined so that understanding is improved and openness maintained. I will look at how the hermeneutic consciousness is realised and consider whether it is only what happens to us by chance. Gadamer himself suggests that cultivation is possible. Based on the forward-directed powers of understanding, we recognise that language brings ideas that reach other people. Thus we hold ourselves back from opinion to allow ourselves to recognise the others' views. We recognise the autonomy of one other as well as the autonomy of the self in interaction with one another. *'In the end this is one of the basic conditions for human beings to be able to live together at all in a human way'* (Gadamer 2004:11).

Practical hermeneutics

Gadamer is always at pains to emphasise that hermeneutics is not a practice, but it is practical. His synthesis of the determinacy of historically effected consciousness and the opportunities of prejudice, conversation and fusion has guided the direction of my inquiry. Since I first started to read Gadamer in 2005, along with scholars of the school of modern hermeneutics such as Warnke, Dostal and Marshall, I have adopted the philosophy as I understand it as a prejudice of my own. I have listened, read, written and taken part in conversations and formal dialogues in which hermeneutic consciousness has become ever more insistent for me. Once a consciousness is in operation it seems, (be it historical, developmental, hermeneutic, scientific or other), it begins to have an active effect on understanding.

In this thesis I explore the tension between truth and method and between hermeneutic and development consciousness across the twenty-five years of my working life. I begin in chapter 3 with the point of departure: a provocation of acute misunderstanding for a young foreigner in Sudan. I embark on an investigation into the history of that misunderstanding within my own education and culture, and put the concept of historicity under scrutiny. In chapter 4, I describe a series of experiences of development work in East Africa and demonstrate how prejudice and vagueness close off opportunities for understanding. I note how they are challenged by their own inconsistencies and failure to deliver desired results. In response to failure, I then turn to the promises of development theory and practice, and consider in chapter 5 the limits of theorisation for coming to understandings with others. In examining the kind of consciousness that is prevalent in my field, I ask to what extent Gadamer's conditions of openness are present. Chapter 6 looks at the unfolding of understanding in the day-to-day experience of being together with others trying to get development right, and chapter 7 explores modes of listening in dialogue and conversation that arose when I jettisoned the idea of welfare work and adopted something like a hermeneutic approach to my work. In the concluding chapter 8, I reach an accommodation between truth and method which is something of a point of arrival and a point of departure for new questions. I

review what I have learned about method, consciousness and understanding and I consider the implications for me and for people with an interest in development.

I now turn to the method that I have used to collect together and account for the material and ideas that make up this narrative. I begin with its basis in phenomenology, a philosophical approach that underscores the organisation of Gadamer's own investigation. It is, as Gadamer puts it, a critique of objectivity and a form of research that brings subjectivity in (TM 243 & 245).

Phenomenology

The term phenomenology combines the Greek words *phainomenon* (φαινόμενον) and *logos* (λόγος) – letting the thing speak (Heidegger 2008:58-9). 'It signifies the activity of giving an account, giving a logos of various phenomena, of the various ways in which things can appear' (Sokolowski 2000:13). Things are evidenced, (successfully presented) rather than proved (*ibid* 164). It is 'a style of philosophising that attempts to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experienter' (Moran 2000:4).

Edmund Husserl initiated the phenomenological movement in European philosophy at the start of the twentieth century. Drawing on his teacher Brentano and refuting the primacy of mind over matter epitomised by Descartes and Hume, he put forward a radical perspective on knowledge and consciousness based on the combined perceptual and functional aspects of 'things themselves' (*ibid* 5). Whereas Descartes argues for rational judgment as the source of understanding and Hume for the natural role of experience, the phenomenologists argue for the primacy of the thing itself in its expression in sense and language. Scientific or theoretical insight depends first on an original situation of practical concerned encounter and accessing things as they are while minimising the role of consciousness is an abstraction, only possible in theory (*ibid* 231-233). Likewise considering all to be consciousness and reality to be out of reach is equally abstract. Phenomenology suggests that the distancing of 'objectivity' is a willed exercise, which is useful when its limits are recognised, but

it is not the whole of truth. Husserl, for instance, points out that consciousness is indivisible from the things that it intends. He developed a method of getting at the things themselves, the '*eidetic reduction*', which involves repeated description of every available aspect, dimension, profile and moment of that thing as it appears to consciousness, repeatedly clearing away that which is not essential and that which is assumption (Sokolowski 2000; Ladkin 2005).

Husserl's work was taken up by a number of philosophers, including Heidegger and Gadamer, Sartre, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty and it influenced many more, including the American pragmatists. All of these worked in different ways on eradicating the dislocation of mind and the things of the world. Ladkin draws out three threads which are broadly common to these different philosophers and which are applicable to my research. Each emphasises the day-to-day world as the source of understanding. Following from this, they investigate experience in the world as the locus of understanding and subjectivity in its contribution to truth and meaning (Ladkin 2005:112).

These philosophers drew on and developed Husserl's ideas, and in using phenomenology for their own purposes they made the idea of phenomenology itself more realistic and pragmatic. While revolutionary in its spirited resistance to the Enlightenment idea that a dissecting objective stance was a realistic possibility, Husserl's work suffered from its own lack of realism. His attempts to '*suspend our beliefs*' in order to see the thing more clearly are just that, attempts (Sokolowski 2000:49). Many, including his one-time assistant Martin Heidegger, criticised the suggestion that it was possible to get to the essential nature of a thing by 'bracketing' all that was extraneous. Heidegger criticised Husserl for underemphasising the contingent nature of the hermeneutic situation, referencing three elements of being that are always affecting phenomena as we let them express themselves: '*facticity*' (or *historicity*), the state of being thrown into and effected by history; *temporality*, the dynamic and projective effect of living as time; and *interpretation*, the expression of the thing in the light of facticity and temporality (Moran 2000:20). Getting at the essential is always already getting at it with facticity, temporality and interpretation says Heidegger. That means,

explains Moran, that *'Husserl's project of pure description becomes impossible if description is not situated inside a radically historicised hermeneutics'* (ibid 85).

For Heidegger, understanding is grounded in our practical engagements with things. Because beings are concerned with things in the world and with one another, their comportment towards one another is always interpretative. The phenomenal thing is, in Heidegger's parlance, 'ready to hand,' precisely because each of us is concerned with it, and it is in this way that each of us understands it. The thing is insistent as it addresses itself to each of our concerns. Heidegger transforms phenomenology by insisting that it is hermeneutic. When an expression becomes an assertion about something, he says, it hardens, no longer having the fluidity of its relation to the thing itself. Phenomenology, conversely, is a mode of *'grasping and explicating phenomena in a way which is original and intuitive'* but which is also *'directly opposed to the naïveté of a haphazard, 'immediate', and unreflective 'beholding''* (Heidegger 2008:61).

Phenomenology opens up new vistas previously obscured by Enlightenment concepts of objectivity and the efforts of logic to avoid the bias of individual perspective. It does not assume only a world of things that can be made objective by science, but a life-world in which we are all immersed and which defines all our modes of understanding, including our ability to conceive of things objectively for our subjective concerns. Heidegger notes that all understanding is understanding of something, by someone in a world in which there are other people too (ibid 154). He offers the possibility of a new kind of research which is beyond the objective, because: *'understanding always pertains to the whole basic state of Being-in-the-world'* (ibid 184). Reason and Bradbury's term 'participative' involves a similar thought. It suggests that we co-author understanding in the world. For them, adopting a participatory worldview is not a matter of constructing a fiction or being relativist, but an expression of our interaction with real phenomena (Reason and Bradbury 2001b:6-8). We generate truth about something from and with one another in the encounters of conversation, inquiry and the world-embracing effects of being. Participation is an ontological state of affairs and ways of knowing are likewise participative (Heron and Reason 1997).

Pursuing this idea in order to find a way of researching, Ladkin suggests that what is important to phenomenological work is how we account for the locatedness of what we express (2005:123). Accounting is an attempt at clarity rather than an exercise of bracketing or objectivity. It means making something more intelligible for another and for oneself by embracing it in its historical and communal meaning and making it transparent in those terms. Its potential lies in an expression that has common sense (TM 27), meaning (Ladkin 2005:123), plausibility (Chabal & Daloz 2006:4), and which is pragmatic (Rorty 1999: xxv), practical and action-centred (Reason and Bradbury 2001b:8; Reason and Torbert 2001), edifying (Cheney 2005:102) and fitting (Goodman and Elgin 1988:158).

I have given here a configuration of phenomenology that works for my current purpose of exploring how people come to understandings. I have not tried to explicate the method and philosophy as a whole and in all its variations. I am drawn to the suggestion that it is the life-world that generates understanding, and that phenomena are themselves insistent and demanding, rather than objects of scientific investigation. What I experience as the things themselves is not my consciousness and their objectivity, but our belonging to each other. As I converse with others about these things, we meet them and each other in our curiosity and concern and our various accountings create fusions of understanding.

The relevance of phenomenology to my inquiry

I am aware that my attraction to phenomenology is rooted in my western European culture. My culture has distanced the 'thing' from consciousness, as well as one person from another, ruptures that demand to be healed. Other cultures have not made such divisions and might not see the background to my concern. Native American philosophy, for instance, might suggest that practices are more important than things, given its sense of how living beings bring the world into being through comportment (Cheney and Weston 1999). Their ontology emerges from their ethical practices of respect for what they encounter. My culture has given me doubt and disrespect. My use of phenomenology, in attempting to bring back together parts of my world that had been split apart by

excessive application of science and administration, is a move towards ethical practice and a new and appropriate ontology.

Why would a phenomenological approach be useful in my inquiry? The modern consciousness that I express in my development work suggests that I can and should be asserting truths and manipulating things and people. Yet this conception affects my accounting of the things that I try to know and my interaction with the people that I meet. Layers of theory seem to encrust themselves like salts on my judgements and questions. Their epistemology often creates a barrier between me and the world rather than always opening it to understanding. I take up ideas that have been created at other times and in other places, ideas that have been extemporised, generalised, rationalised, rephrased and clichéd and life's touch shrinks away from thought.

Within my own culture I seldom noticed theoretical encrustations, or if I did, because someone was challenging the theory with yet another theory, I did not notice the fact that they were neither of them the thing they were talking about. When I met people of another culture I noticed they were perplexed when I spoke. So I wanted to pay attention to the chasms of assumption across which I leapt so blithely. In the face of different kinds of consciousness, I became aware of my own modern, rational, technological, administrative consciousness as a situated one. To me phenomenology proposes important methodological suggestions: I recognise the unique moment of any encounter. I take note of when and with what I am theorising and call it into question. I consider the limits and historicity of any consciousness and I attend to assumptions and generalisations. I look with care at the detail of things as they appear to me and try to give account. I try not to count or order them using unspoken notions that I have borrowed from elsewhere.

It would be impossible, as Gadamer points out, to live without theory, generalisation, assumption or categorisation (TM 490). He clarifies that presuppositions are not laid aside to allow correct judgment, but are the necessary ground for any insight that arises (TM 276). Attention to the things themselves cannot mean being wrenched from the ordinary way that I build understanding

on my pre-existing insights about something (TM 567). When I look in a phenomenological way, what I note is the ground and the encounter together. I put aside my tendency to bring in theory and category without noticing it, or to assume self-evidence where there is in fact an insistent demand on my ability to make subtle distinctions in what is speaking to me. I also put aside assumptions that the thing I am encountering is only a manifestation of my own mind and emotions. It is there in itself, quite real. To understand I am using my prejudgments and experience and opening them to question, while exploring and strengthening the arguments of the other (TM 292).

I have attempted to embrace a phenomenological method of clarity and coherence, particularly as it is used by Gadamer and Arendt (Arendt 1966; 1969; Gadamer 2004). I admire their writing, its insistence. To inquire into how something is presenting itself, rather than what I assume about it, is to merge with a process of continuous arising and to have the opportunity to take note of it in all the forms by which it presents itself. Gadamer points out that we cannot escape our own presence in understanding. We are not objective observers of phenomena, but we do, to a greater or lesser extent, open ourselves to the event that is occurring as we come to meet the phenomenon (TM 269).

How does a phenomenological approach offer something to the three arenas of consciousness addressed in this thesis, hermeneutic, developmental and pastoralist? First, it offers a method of focused and comprehensive engagement with the hermeneutic question of understanding: I look at how it presents itself to me in numerous different instances. These observations strengthen arguments for the primordial function of life experience in all of understanding. Second, it offers to clarify development consciousness as I have encountered it. Development is an arena where irreconcilable contests of social theory entwine with ethical notions of goodness and fairness, making the business into a minefield of confused intervention. Phenomenology has the potential to offer an insight to those who, like me, want to come to understandings about what is going on in these embattled contexts. Third, it offers to meet non-western consciousness with a new clarity. It helps to present the ways of thinking that are the hallmarks of western consciousness, making interactions perhaps a little less perplexing.

My own experience as a field of inquiry

In the chapters that follow I tell stories from my education and working life. I do not refer to these experiences because I find them psychologically interesting or universally telling, but because it is fitting with the demands of hermeneutic inquiry to act in this way. To account for understanding as it arises, as I understand it, means looking at how it arises in my own experience. The subject of understanding is separable neither from my own acts of engagement with the question, nor from its origins in my history. I need a field and a method that does not attempt to ignore or bracket my own role. In looking at my own experience, the research finds a focus that is at once manageable, accessible, real and open to reiterated attempts at comprehension and truthfulness. It is fitting with the three elements of phenomenology noted by Ladkin that I should look in this direction: understanding plays out in day-to-day life, it arises as experience, and subjectivity provides the suppositions that are brought into question (Ladkin 2005).

Choosing this approach was not only a philosophical and pragmatic decision, the question was also driven by deep concern with my own misunderstandings and those of my industry. Heidegger's concept of the formal structure of a question suggests that its formulation is guided by the inquirer's concept of what is sought (BT 24-26)⁶. To begin to make the question transparent and understand the answers that it generates, he suggests that is necessary to consider the specific concept that created this very particular question at its point of departure. To go back to my own point of departure, to note exactly how the question was formulated, its nuances and concepts, its expectations and hopes, I had to return to its early manifestations in my own experience and look at it more carefully. With this in mind, I retraced my steps to look for the origin of the question, an exploration that I will turn to in the next chapter.

Understanding, according to Gadamer, is not the object of experience, but experience itself (TM xxi & 259). And Heidegger suggests that it is not adequate to

⁶ From now on I will use (BT: #, §#) to refer to the relevant page and section in Heidegger's 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time*, 2008 Harper Perennial edition, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

know something only by having applied theoretical logic or empirical tests to it, it is also necessary to *experience* it in itself, in its usefulness and its relation to me and to my life (Ladkin 2005). So with some unwillingness, born of embarrassment, I tried out the idea that my own stories, if correctly told, could be the field of inquiry in which the actual happening of insight was making itself known. It was my own understanding that was oriented towards understanding and which understood. I was the inquirer who asked the question and approached it with certain prior conceptions of how it happens. I attempted to clarify these conceptions that were making up the ground of the developing question. I charted experiences over a long period, watching as my judgements developed in encounter with people and events, continuously renewing and amending the question while holding fast to the central phenomenon of understanding. I was presented with a wealth of material to investigate. Where else but in myself could I look at how understanding happened with such care? Where else could I watch and take note of its changing form as I attended to it as a thing in itself?

A thesis that uses personal experience as its main field of interrogation may be criticised for bias and lack of broad significance. But I suggest that these criticisms only apply to claims of universality and I am not making that claim. I am working instead with a specific and situated question and my method is phenomenological. I do not want to explore understanding between people as a system or define it theoretically. Rather I am looking at its play, where I have access to it and where it is embodied for me in my own encounters with others. It is consistent with what I now consider to be true about understanding, that a story makes a contribution to truth by stimulating understanding and debate in others.

As Husserl recognised, meaning begins with oneself and can be looked at in rigorous self-examination (Moran 2000:61). This kind of ‘methodological solipsism’ is not the whole of the work required to comprehend understanding, but it is a necessary starting point that provides a clear ground from which to interpret how others speak of the matter and to engage with them in effective dialogue about it. Understanding is never the province of a lone individual – it is

always a practical interaction of some sort (TM 307). Questions and ideas emerge in the collision of things and people within the world.

Self-examination and dialogue require methodical approaches if they are not to be formless and inarticulate. Looking at the self demands attention to and accounting of suppositions. Accounting for phenomena means dressing the things encountered in their plainest clothes. Engaging in dialogue with others demands attention to exactly what the others say about the thing in question, and to the way I interpret what they say. To achieve this clarity and simplicity, I turn now to the methods offered by action research.

Action research

Action research is a discipline of inquiry that draws some of its inspiration from the work of phenomenological philosophers. It is a form of research that involves finding appropriate, timely and considerate methods of paying and expanding attention in action and reflection, in balanced dialogue, rigorous questioning and artful co-operation (Reason and Bradbury 2001a:xxv). It has been nourished by pragmatism in the way it promotes exploration of contingent realities that mean something and are useful to people; and by Husserlian phenomenology in the way it embraces the ‘the enigma of subjectivity’ and the ‘life-world’ – the world of lived experience (Reason 2003; Ladkin 2005). The methods expect the student to continue with her work in the world, adding a discipline of inquiry.

Responsibility is a central tenet: action research hopes to promote human flourishing (Reason and Bradbury 2001b), remedy power inequities (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001), improve our own actions (Torbert 2001), build human-to-human relationships (Gordon 2001; Gustavsen 2001) and human-to-nature relationships (Hall 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2001b). This responsibility helps create the focus of each inquiry – what to inquire into is generated by what is urgent and agreed by whichever community is involved. My initial reaction to this good intention is suspicion – as I hope to demonstrate in later chapters, good intentions may not be compatible with clarity. They are often excuses to impose imaginary universal notions of what is right. Nonetheless the proposition that the subject and method

of the inquiry should be generated by what is urgent and agreed does fit with my own notion that understanding is an agreement. If my research method is to be consistent with its idea that understanding is agreement, then it should be about something urgent and agreed.

Action research differs from many other approaches to learning in its conception of and methods for dealing with truth. With positivist empiricist approaches truth is understood as something to be uncovered, and theories can be proved, disproved or improved with proof and argument. With action research truth is understood to arise in the inter-subjective agreements of entities in the world: ideas can be entertained, developed, made use of, and then once more regenerated in the light of ever arising new connections. It is a consistent task of knitting together rather than taking apart.

Many action research techniques and principles make use of a conversational method of inquiry between groups of people (Gustavsen 2001; Heron 2001; Kemmis 2001), while others focus on attentiveness in the first person (Torbert 2001; Chandler and Torbert 2003), and others on examining engagement with ones own environment and organisations (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). My own method involves engaging with and questioning local patterns arising in moments when I and other people are speaking with one another across cultural divides. I tried to avoid seeing my task as being to theorise about great processes of politics and history—much as I am always tempted to explain on a big scale—but to notice moments of understanding, such as they are, as they happen. My engagement is a conversation, with myself and others, texts and the world in general. In each conversation there is presupposition and encounter, question and response, comment and answer.

In the action research tradition researchers are encouraged to clarify first their own position, perspective and presuppositions about the matter in question. As a student, my tutors handed me a bunch of tools, strange tools that I turned over in my mind wondering what they could be for. Write a regular journal, they insisted. Read philosophy and work out your epistemology and ontology, they charged. Be aware of the present and keep records. Go back to what you said and

review it again and again. Consider yourself in all your encounters. Don't tell us, show us.

The unaccustomed levels of attention that I was paying myself made me feel self-indulgent and my inquiries were initially halting and inconsistent. I did not understand the action research approach well, particularly not its underlying epistemology and philosophy, nor was I disciplined in it. I wrote lyrical essays and paid attention to my doubts. I adopted a dramatic line in my stories: a tendency to describe the intense colours of African life in eye-popping detail. While the discipline is internally coherent, it is different from mainstream western social science methodologies and a novice finds it easy to slip back into positivist and comparative approaches assessing, categorising and theorising the world.

My questions grew from and exerted influence on encounters in my work in Ethiopia as well being influenced by the process of my research supervision in UK. I started with a personal question about being a foreigner and a facilitator working on poverty and conflict. I moved on to a political inquiry about power and exploitation. Latterly it transformed itself to a question about how we come to understandings with one another. As the question changed I became confused and felt that I must be making mistakes or delaying the research process with unnecessary detours. The inquiry method, just like its subject matter, was emergent and historically affected.

I now think that the early questions of facilitation and political economy are part of the scanning of pre-suppositions that allowed me to articulate the question I am now addressing. The question of reaching understanding knits together the strands of the problematic by looking at a matter more fundamental than either personal behaviour or political economy. Hermeneutics has offered an elegant and generous resolution to a series of questions about understanding.

Drawing on Stacey's observation that local responsive processes create the coherent structures that we call knowledge, my focus of inquiry starts with what is local (Stacey 2001). I move between the foreground of the encounter and the hinterland of its meanings, and between the edge of my horizon, where the questions lie and new suggestions are embraced, and its hinterland, a field of

previously unquestioned language and culture that makes up my identity and knowledge. All that sounds very mobile and graceful, but in practice I find it difficult to do with any consistency. I cannot always purposely select what is hidden in what I take to be self-evident, it only comes forward when it is provoked. I do not choose when a good question will arise. As a method it is unpredictable. It is like taking an enthusiastic young dog for a walk: I hold on to the thread of the object of inquiry, desperate not to lose it, while it drags me through thickets and rubbish piles, across fields and along rivers, on the scent of something interesting.

The researcher converses with the world and people on the subject of her research. She notes what she hears, thinks and feels (from the other and from herself), she repeats what she hears and says, she watches herself as she observes and interprets, and she iterates the technique to observe changes. I developed a set of basic practices: listening, questioning, writing, reading and conversing. They are ordinary practices, but as I have repeated them, considered them and looked at them closely, they have become my discipline.

My inquiry was not disciplined, but it was insistent and, now I look back on it, focused. I have acres of notebooks, each filled with near-verbatim records of pastoralists, officials and development people speaking, written in idiosyncratic shorthand. There was time to write these because much of what I listen to in my work in Ethiopia comes through a translator, Jarso Guyo Mokku mostly, or Girma Kebede, my companions on this mission to understand. From time to time there is a sketch of a tree, a face, a hand, or a donkey. About a quarter of the notebooks are interviews, with my short questions followed by long answers as the pastoralists or politicians told me their ways and their plans. Most of the rest are what people said at pastoralist gatherings. I took these notebooks home, transcribed the contents of many of them, and read and reread them.

I looked at how people introduced matters, who had replied and what they had said. I looked for agreements and for changes in the timbre of the relationships. I noted ways the speakers explained or proposed and ways they had of diverting debates away from certain subjects. I remembered my own thoughts when I was hearing and scribbling and I noted them down. I remembered the place, the weather, where I was sitting, the things I had noticed and the blanks. I remembered the connections I made with what I thought was going on around us at the time – and noted how I phrased my memories in the language of today. A memory was already a historically affected reworking. I remembered and reconsidered what I imagined lay

behind what each person was saying. A pastoralist in Ethiopia, indeed everyone in Ethiopia, speaks cryptically. He or she will use proverbs and leave large bits out because nobody is going to say certain things out loud - just in case they are speaking to the wrong person. I looked for the differences in the ways people addressed me, how they spoke to other foreigners, to others like themselves and to officials.

When I was having a conversation and was being addressed, (I didn't write notes then), I listened to what they said. I would try to forget what I was wondering about the person speaking, or about something else I had to do, and attempted to listen. I would notice my own mind reacting and responding, even as I was catching sight of a hornbill flying over our heads.

The notes fed into the writing of my life as a development professional. I wrote about events from the past that seemed somehow important. I read and reread what I had written and took out all the parts that were lies and embroidery until what was left was the truth, as far as I could put it. I enjoyed it, it revealed much about the way understanding –which is after all about truth– comes forward, or is sold down the river for promises and fears. My supervisor, Donna Ladkin said, 'I always read your stuff right through to the end before going back to the detail because it is so compelling that it carries me along on a wave. At the end, I realize that half of it makes no sense.' And she was right. At least half of it was a filigree of evasion, speculation and exaggeration with nothing to help a reader know where she was or why. I learned then about the difference between art and artifice. There were times when I took out all the artifice from a piece of writing and there was nothing left. Then I would throw that story away.

I was also reading. Philosophers, political economists, novelists, activists, historians and critical theorists were my primary sources: the subject was African and European history, politics, culture, development and philosophy. I was interested in the subjects the authors spoke about and watched my own experiences coming forward in response. I was also interested in the way each argument, if it was well made, seemed so compelling. I was confused when another author, whose argument I found equally compelling, would criticize and contradict the argument of the first. I examined what was compelling me. Many of the books made claims to universality and yet, ultimately I saw them as applicable to their place and time, treatises that told me about the ways of thinking and meanings of a given culture and locality. Each one fitted with its neighbours within my imaginary geography, but none could achieve universality. I also began to make distinctions between what is written with an effort towards truth and what is merely written well. For me, Gadamer stands as the ultimate truthful writer, one who has looked at his subject at length and with great care before he writes.

My use of stories

This thesis claims validity through the stimulus and provocation of a rich and pointed story of experience, rather than through observations, questionnaires or abstract logics. I hope the approach provokes a reply and a conversation begins. When Karl Jaspers says that philosophizing should be a '*perpetual shaking up, a perpetual appeal to the powers of life in oneself and others,*' I believe he is referring to a similarly provocative and anti-universal approach (Moran and Mooney 2002:358). To have conversation means to be awake to the world and working with it in ways that respect its changing nature and baffling variety.

In this thesis I tell a series of personal stories and meet the phenomenon of understanding in them. I start by looking at an emblematic incident that provoked the inquiry into the forefront of my concerns. To this encounter, and the other experiences that I relate in the following chapters, I have returned repeatedly over the course of my research. I reinterpreted and reused each story, at each retelling paring it down and changing a word here and there. Interpretive adjectives and adverbs came and went – a caustic slant in my embarrassment, or a triumphant note in my performance at the time of writing. I noticed that the essential base of each story remained the same. The core of the encounter persisted and held its own through successive reinterpretations and rejections. It was only through noticing this that I arrived at recognition of the phenomenological method that was, and still is, in operation.

The stories that follow tell of encounters that happened between the 1960s and the 1990s. They were written down in the period between 2002 and 2008 for my study at Bath University. During that time I was coming to Bath to debate with my study group and tutor once every few months and for each visit I would write a story or an essay. At first my work was based out of the UK Institute of Development Studies, taking me to Sweden and Brazil, Bangladesh and Uganda, and I was spending increasing time in Ethiopia working on dialogues with pastoralists until I settled there full-time in 2004. My studies were at an early stage and I felt that my claims about the world made hardly any sense to other people who did not know my work. I imagined that I gave too little evidence and

too weak a contextual description to make what I was saying comprehensible and compelling. So I was determined to provide well-told and accurate stories which would orient my interlocutors to the situation and allow them to see as I saw and thus prove my claims to be true.

Later I came to approach the same experiences in a different way, that is, to examine how I was coming to understand both in the encounter itself and coming to understand the function the story was playing each time it was invoked. There is an essential difference between the story teller of the early years of this research (2002-2007), who was using each experience to make an analytical claim dressed up in descriptive words, and the story teller of today (2008-9), who is using the experience to see more clearly into the lightning-fast movement of life as it is lived. If in the early years of the study I was interested to give the story texture, proof and reason to make it work better as a claim; today I am interested to see what happens when the story is enabled to speak for itself as far as I can allow it to do so, making fewer theoretical claims.

This is a phenomenological point, whereby the speaker achieves a cooler perspective on the matter in question through de-scaling the phenomenon of too many layers of abstraction and through thinning the interpretations down to a more precise point relating to the phenomenon's own intention. The unelaborated story is a simple one whose helpful challenge may be easier to hear than a story with too much performance and too many unexamined beliefs, justifications and wishes. When presupposition becomes a self-reflecting mirror that stops me from engaging with the experience at all, I begin to feel I must be missing something.

Another reason to notice the difference between the story tellers of the first and second periods of the research (2002-7 and 2008-9) is that with their different attitudes each asks something different of the story. The teller of the 2003 version asks, 'what else could or should I have done in the situation?' while the teller of today's version asks, 'what is happening with understanding here?' This adjustment in how I am using the stories mirrors Gadamer's distinction between scientific method and philosophy, where the philosopher's interest is in the happenings that lie beyond our wishing and wanting, (*not what we do or what we*

ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing' (TM xxviii)).

I want to take a philosophical rather than a methodical approach, because I believe it will allow the phenomena of understanding to speak for themselves. A methodical approach that presupposes 'a finding' seems to distance the subject at hand. A philosophical approach that merely wants to see what is happening seems to open channels of understanding previously closed by theorizing and methodologising.

The universality of the approach

Admonishing those who rely on scientific methodology to recognise the limits of its empiricism and theory, Gadamer shows science to be a form of consciousness which is located rather than universal, and useful for that very reason. This view calls into question reliance on any one consciousness as a way of understanding everything. Modes of thought arise from the effects of history, from provisional prejudice, from encounter and fusion by a process of doubt and question. Gadamer gives texture to the argument that there are and must be multiple kinds of consciousness which develop, meet, fuse and compete.

Lest we should sink into confused relativism arising from the idea that consciousnesses are multiple and there is no absolute truth, phenomenology comes to the rescue. It shows consciousness to be an aspect of the things themselves. Consciousness and the thing are one. The solidity of the world returns; a solidity that I think we cannot help but feel and know, arising as it does from the existential fact of consciousness. How real things are interpreted varies, but the thing itself remains itself.

Gadamer's encounter with tradition and Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology argue for an inquiry that involves the self as an unembarrassed perceiver of the phenomenon in question. Bringing the self and the phenomenon home to each other is a radical and I would argue fundamental way of coming to understanding.

That I should try to understand with the rest of the world is something for which I have a range of motivations in combination with existential necessity. I do not think that there is any universal morality underlying the matter, although there is a historically effected morality that each of us has. I am working to a pragmatic morality of my own, one that makes sense within my world. It is built on certain suppositions that I hold to be true for our situation for now, but these beliefs are not god-given and they are mutable in the course of our inquiries.

What I suggest here is not going to be universally applicable. I hope only to be engaging or, better still, provoking. Hermeneutics makes claims to universality. How can we deal with this apparent paradox? It is the concept of interpretation that releases us. Hermeneutics itself, and anything purporting to be universal, must be constantly reinterpreted.

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