

Chapter 9 – Concluding Remarks

Considering understanding as a phenomenon, I have interpreted it as it has presented itself to me in my own experience. I saw that I come to understandings with others, never alone. Our diverse histories and cultures anticipate meaning and provoke questions in each other, from which arise not misunderstandings or understandings, but different kinds of understanding. Theory and presupposition give my understanding of things an instability that is openness. They seem ready to be refuted and in time, they are.

In this final chapter I review the explorations of this inquiry. The first section considers the foundations of understanding as consciousness. The second provides a summarised articulation of understanding in terms of history, distance and dialogue. The third looks briefly at some of the arenas in which understanding is always operating and yet is often unrecognised; and the final section considers the ramifications of this work.

Foundations

My conception of understanding rests on the notion of consciousness as being 'outside' the self and 'alongside' the world and the other, given to me by Martin Heidegger (BT 89). From consciousness of Being comes *consciousness as understanding*, nourished by historicity, projection and care. Gadamer's hermeneutic themes of historicity and prejudice, provocation and wholeness, openness, fusion of horizons and agreement provide then a set of open questions which I interpret in concrete examples of my own. Other philosophers and thinkers working on understanding from practical, ethical, political and ecological perspectives, including Warnke, Goodman, Elgin, Cheney, Weston, Chabal, Abram, Sarris and unpublished philosophers I met in East Africa, echo and enrich the idea of interpretive agreement with notions of *consideration, meaning* and *mattering*. European writers Arendt, Habermas, Foucault and Weber give me

insights into aspects of my own cultural history, while African writers like Achebe and Okri give me a view of a different world.

Consciousness comes into the foreground. Even at its most quiescent, it has form (Cheney 1998:274). Its fundamental nature is to differentiate and unify: *this is, this is not; it is so* (TM 252). Different consciousnesses arise of different cultures and modes of attention. Western development consciousness, for example, born of a history of colonial and missionary intervention, gives us distinctions of developed and under-developed, rich and poor, modern and traditional, by which we see ourselves as dividing up and *acting on* the world. What might be termed ‘pastoralist consciousness’, born of existence within a particular ecology and history, gives them distinctions of mobile and immobile, capable and incapable, truth and lies, by which they co-operate with the world. Hermeneutic consciousness, I learned, brings forward distinctions of parts and whole, and history and encounter, and it also emphasises fusion and belonging. This emphasis transforms differentiation from a divisive, cutting notion to a notion of articulation, entirety and dynamism. These three consciousnesses – developmental, pastoralist and hermeneutic are all forms of understanding, capable of merging with one another and with other consciousnesses, while retaining their distinctive histories. What makes hermeneutic consciousness special is that it is consciousness of understanding itself.

Articulating understanding

History

In the foregoing chapters I have considered understanding from various angles. I started in chapter 3 with the fundamental and irreducible influence of history on all of us. I have explored how prejudice, which Gadamer rehabilitated as the ground for new understanding, is profoundly historical. This state of being flung into history and always expressing and expanding it, is manifest in the ever differentiating and fusing variety of cultural horizons. The tradition of any

concept defines the parameters of its current meaning and what is offered for re-evaluation in the face of the challenges of encounter.

Historicity for us is expressed in language. Thought is language, language expresses the world, and it reaches from the past into the future as it is spoken, played or gestured. It is in constant state of renewal, not in a straightjacket, but on a launch-pad. We are always speaking with another from our tradition. The kind of interpretation that remains true to the thing itself, adding new aspects and shedding obsolete opinions, is not about perfect words and abstracted explanations; rather it is about perfect communication. Language speaks the achievement and disasters of all our cultures. It is the understandings we open for each other when we are clear about things, know the limits of our knowledge and communicate. History is always present and productive. It has a depth of effect and a breadth of potential.

Distance

In the second phase of my inquiry, in chapters 4 and 5, I looked at the problematic of understanding as it is manifest in incomprehension, fearful concern and abstraction. Many people have a sense that our world is fragmented. This sense is made possible by a consciousness that stresses division and category, separation and the possibility of domination. Yet looking closely at my experience I note that my consciousness was also constantly assailed by connection across distance and the claims made on me by the things and people I encountered. Connection was not always benign. I experienced the kinds of connection that suppressed new understandings; the vague everyday that blanketed me from too much thinking and the kinds of connection that generated so much agreement for some that it alienated others.

I explored how strangeness and distance generated cruelty and indifference, while paradoxically offering the potential for surprise and innovation. I saw how easy it is to turn away from the apparent irrelevance of the strange and distasteful. In my own profession I clarified that I felt no real responsibility for the other, because I held it at a distance in order to manipulate it. But I also noted that

distance and strangeness were already offering the possibility of connection. I was provoked by strangeness and even by insult and it brought forward questions. I had to understand how you could have ideas so different from mine – could I encompass your ideas and mine together? Distance proves to be productive. Human finitude and its expression in culture prove to be the ground of creativity and agreement.

Dialogue

I then considered the way understanding arises in conversation between you and me; between me, other people and things. The fundamental and relentless structure of question and answer found its expression in dialogue in which new aspects of the concrete reality that I sought to be ready for were constantly proffered. I find that conversations are driven less by the people in them than by the things under discussion. The more focused they are, the more productive the conversation. The more surprising the remark, the greater the possibility that what has been self-evident to me (hidden from my view), will be called forward to be enhanced or amended. I apply what I hear to what I have provisionally concluded and I respond, thus am I and you bound together and to the thing we are talking about.

With the help of the African pastoralists, for whom understanding is as important as it is for me, but who construe it from an entirely different history of thought, I saw new aspects of understanding that I had not previously appreciated. What had, at the early stages of my research, appeared to be a comportment of each individual being, became a comportment of entire societies and cultures. The thing talked of, embodied in the spoken word, travelled across people, time and space in restless inquiry. From women in tea shops, through researchers in hotels, through elders deliberating on justice, through officials wanting to administer it all, through young people thinking about the future, the conversation flowed inexorably on. I learned that while understanding is always prior to conversation, making it possible, it also nourishes itself on conversation.

The play of the three

Now I am I looking at all three together: history, geography and society, in play with one another, always active. I note that each culture has its own way of holding the world together built of its recognition and appreciation of the interplay of these three in their language, culture and institutions. Borana pastoralists move across the land to important places: *'here are rain, prosperity and peace,'* they chant. They sit in their shades and make judgments on practical things. Europeans send representatives to parliament, have police forces and go to churches, mosques, temples and festivals. Each is an expression of how we act on our understandings arising from history, distance and dialogue. We all have ways of celebrating which tie us together (Esteva and Prakash 1998). Each culture knits together the consciousness-broken bones of reality, wrapping and healing them in their own historically effected conversations.

Application

As a development professional based in Ethiopia I have been party to seemingly endless reiterations of incomprehension. I have had a role in plenty and famine, peace and war, probity and corruption. My understanding of what we were talking about, agreeing, investing in and doing was coloured by my own perspectives on the impressive scale of patronage, cruelty and resistance that I witnessed and was part of.

Although it is tempting to use this experience to suggest how we can be better at reaching understanding in similar circumstances, creating an ideal approach, I instead have considered simply what is happening. My application of philosophical ideas, where political suspicions are acute and notions of superiority are strong, yields detail as to how understanding occurs – at least in one life and its connected lives.

I conclude that I have come to understandings with others in the fluid process of conversation, where we see ourselves mirrored, and enriched, in what we encounter. We are interpreting ourselves and the world as historically affected

beings; as communities and cultures in engagement. This notion of how understanding arises has been almost totally ignored in my profession. Recognising it could have implications for comprehending how people relate to each other across enormous divides of wealth, identity, tradition and power.

My investigation has shown how easy it is to contribute to exploitation, cruelty and despair. I asked at the beginning of this thesis whether there was a link between disrespect and misunderstanding. It may have sounded naïve to connect something as nasty as cruelty with something as apparently bland as understanding. But, as I hope I have demonstrated, understanding is by no means bland. Understanding is powerful and fundamental stuff. It is how people are with other people and the world. It is not something that belongs to one person, but to entire communities (of whatever sort). It is a tireless traveller, forever questing ahead of where it is now for new ways of understanding. In my experience where people increase the clarity of their understandings with one another, whoever they are, they demand respect and get it. Understanding is not something bestowed, like empathy, or charity, but what underlies the state of respect.

Violence to people and nature is a terrible canker. While there are a few encouraging signs in the environmental field, there is not much evidence to show that violent conflict is going to decline. The ways in which people put violence to rest, keep it at bay, are based on an application of intelligence across a whole range of social, economic, spiritual, environmental and political fields. It is a situation in which understandings are fundamental and in which respect plays a crucial role. In the sciences, too, understanding is always at play. Wisdom is always working alongside technology, although its role is not always recognised. The crisis of confidence in modern science, multinational business and the global economy in the light of climate change and economic turbulence is creating big debates which call for clear understanding not only of the things themselves, but of the kinds of consciousness that underlie our contributions to the situation.

Within my own sector, the development profession, many would argue that there is a major problem (Duffield 2005; Moyo 2009). In my experience in East Africa I

can hazard that conditions for the majority of poor people for most of the time are getting worse. Meanwhile, the development profession does not have to account fully to anyone for the pitiful results of its good intentions and fixed understandings. Development consciousness, which I earlier defined as involving bringing the unruly into line, has much to answer for, because it fails to accept that consciousness must be and always is open to the possibility that the other could be right.

In all these arenas hermeneutics is a consciousness of how we live together and is a foundation for the art of coming to agreements. Wisdom continues to make its contribution to the lives we all live today, even as it is denigrated as old fashioned and no longer necessary in our rationalised world. It is not a vestige of antiquity, but a fundamental aspect of existence. In every arena it is there, although not recognised as wisdom; instead it is called experience, understanding or capability. It is how each being senses what is there, what is fitting, what it is to communicate, and in what way and when to act.

Ramifications

Art of agreement

In the first chapter I asked whether there is an art of agreement and whether such an art can be enhanced. I conclude that there is an art of agreement, but I now understand that an art is as much technique, as it is practice, as it is consciousness. What this thesis has taught me is that the starting point is consciousness, from which practice arises, from which an art comes into being.

Art has an element of method, but it is also crucially beyond it. I found no evidence on my journey for any concrete conditions that could always be put into place to enhance understanding. If I had a hermeneutic consciousness born of experience, then I would have something like Aristotle's moral capability. This capability arises mainly, I think, in a comportment that opens conditions for fitting action in me and others. The art of agreement is not a way of manipulating—it is openness to an experience of something that asserts itself as

true. For my purposes in development it is when I bring clarity and coherence into play with attention and conversation.

Research

It is, I think, reasonable to suggest that phenomenological research makes a contribution to an art of agreement—it raises hermeneutic consciousness. As I said in chapter 1, when the subject matter is development, the hermeneutic implication is to consider the things, people and institutions themselves in multiple aspects, while also noting where we get our truths from and how we negotiate and account for them. When research connects traditions, pays attention to the history of assumptions and is scrupulously clear about the things of its concern, it enhances hermeneutic consciousness in the practice of it. When research is properly and repeatedly challenged by different cultures, it foregrounds and expands its presuppositions. Its abstractions are called to account. When it is called back to the lifeworld of those who are researched, it provokes the dynamic conversations that nourish understanding.

Beyond exploitation

I want, more than anything, for understanding to flourish. Poor people, who number in the billions, have vast capability for coming to understandings with those who do not yet converse with them; those who do not hold them in respect. It is a potential that is unrecognised in development and modernity. The result for many is divisiveness, hopelessness and anger.

One of the chief criticisms of Gadamer has been his rehabilitation of prejudice and his emphasis on tradition. Critics argue that tradition belongs mainly to the winners who define ideology to their own benefit and to the detriment of the losers: the poor, the minorities and the weak. Tradition, some say, belongs to the police state, the rapists and the tyrants (John Caputo cited in Marshall 2004). But Gadamer is neither for nor against tradition; he only points out that it is a condition of our being ready for the future. It is true that discrimination and violence lead as often to silence as to productive conversation. But this truth does not provide an argument against what Gadamer has understood. Any

emancipatory efforts will always be grounded in an understanding arising from tradition.

Even if tradition does harbour the interests of the wealthy and powerful—and such people are often unashamed appreciators of it—it also is a great leveller. The hermeneutic attitude is accessible to anyone who comes across it who is willing to give it attention. This I learned from some of the pastoralists I spoke to, many of whom have a hermeneutic attitude of their own, and who speak with crystalline clarity much of the time.

Even though there turns out to be no method of understanding, in turning attention to understanding and in stumbling over and eventually assimilating a hermeneutic consciousness, a certain power begins to accrue. It is a power with language—not an educated language of curly phrases, jargon and long words—but a possibility of listening and speaking clearly and coherently about things. Clarity is attractive. It allows people to agree things with other people and means they can collaborate. It gives them the capabilities to create the freedoms and connections that Amartya Sen suggests make up development. What Gadamer does for me is clarify the importance of speaking the world; not hardening it to a terminology, but giving hearing always to the other and to oneself. What we have lost in our development world, or perhaps never properly had, is an ability to converse.

—o0o—