GADAMER AND THE GAME OF TRUTH: FRAMES AND FUSIONS

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> The genius of verbal consciousness consists…in its fundamental metaphorical nature….
>
> The concept of play…unites events and understanding.
> –Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*[1]

> Playfulness comes and
> goes with youth until you learn
> there's no other way.
> –Mark Mitchell

Over the past year, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with counseling faculty to develop a Social Foundations of Education course tailored specifically for Masters level preparation of school and community counselors. This exploration of dilemmas arising during the first offering of the course compares the interpretive and communicative possibilities of two metaphors: George Lakoff's analysis of *frames* and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic *fusion of horizons*. Both metaphors are mined for their insights, entailments, and implications for educators.

In a Social Foundations of Education course tailored for counselors, the interplay of privilege and power is traced across differences in race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Beginning with classic studies revealing the surprising, dramatic, and subtle dynamics of power, class investigations build upon examples of historical and evolving notions of group and individual identity. After examining value distinctions inherent in absolutism, pluralism, relativism, and nihilism in the first half of the semester, educational policy and practice dilemmas involving racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and homophobia are examined through the lenses of social theory and the rich personal experiences of class members.

I was glad to learn that the spring 2006 class included members who were already involved in community and school counseling. Their colleagues and I could look to them for "reality-tested" reactions and practical alternatives to the readings. Given the breadth of the course, I felt I needed a supplemental text that would encourage ongoing personal application. I wanted an accessible book, easily tailored to current and future roles. On the recommendation of a colleague, I assigned for book club discussions and "reality testing" Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life,* hoping that practicing and prospective counselors would be intrigued by the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process, which has been endorsed by, among others, Arun Gandhi, William Ury, and Deepak Chopra.[2]

The NVC process seems simple: (1) look for and carefully observe concrete actions that are influencing our sense of well being, (2) explore how we feel in relation to our observations, (3) identify the needs, values, and desires that generate our feelings, and (4) specify requests that we believe will enrich our lives. This four-step process has two major aspects: we need to be able to express ourselves, and we need to be able to receive communications empathetically. I anticipated that counselors would find this framework useful as a complement to the counseling strategies they were learning in their required coursework. Since NVC is "not simply a language or a set of techniques for using words," but a kind of "consciousness and intent," I thought the more experienced counselors would be eager to demonstrate ways they would refine or adapt the approach. I was wrong.

While a few people loved the book and began applying the ideas immediately in their home and work lives, several summarily "boycotted" the text, declaring it patronizing, unrealistic, and certainly not worth their time. One group continued to discuss the book, but in humorous ways, making fun of the sample dialogues during roleplays. Other groups warmed up to some chapters but panned others, particularly the early chapters with "recipes" for "observing without evaluating" and "building a vocabulary for feelings." I had not anticipated the strength or the range of responses and did not handle the situation in model NVC fashion myself. NVC is not a "natural" for me either—one of the reasons I selected the text.[3]

An experienced counselor in the Spring 2006 Social Foundations class was appalled when several high school teenage girls at his school initiated a serious round of cyber bullying. His counseling response was to bring in the "perpetrators," clarify school rules, reinforce the obligation to follow rules, apply punishment, and strictly monitor MySpace.com for future noncompliance. It became clear that his approach was not exactly the process Rosenberg and other nonviolent communication practitioners would advocate, but the class was hard pressed to offer a viable NVC response. Metaphors of framing and fusion suggest distinctive possibilities for interpreting these dilemmas.

Framing Differences

Lakoff's "framing" grounded in his earlier work on the primacy of metaphor in human cognition suggests that tacit metaphorical differences might be at play in both the graduate class book club and high school cyber bullying dilemmas just described.[4] Lakoff views metaphorical frames as pre-understandings, often unconscious, more powerful than facts, and constitutive of conclusions about the situations we encounter in the world. He asserts, for example, that preunderstandings can lead to political conflicts based on different interpretations of the "Nation as Family" metaphor.[5] Some see the "Nation as a Strict Father"—protecting and teaching us (citizens/children) right

from wrong and using painful punishment as needed for our own good; others see the "Nation as Nurturant Parent"— responding to our needs and encouraging empathy for others less fortunate by modeling cooperation and accepting shared responsibility.

Sociologist James Ault's case study of a fundamentalist community in Worcester, Massachusetts, extends Lakoff's comparison. The key distinction in Ault's analysis is between *given* families and *chosen* families. Within a *given* family frame, obligation is inherited, family based, primary, and sustaining. Though sometimes unpleasant or inconvenient, obligations are ultimately enriching. Within a *chosen* family frame, obligations are negotiated, not limited to biological family members, and flexible. Though sometimes agonizing and challenging, principled and freely chosen commitments are also enriching. In the *given* family frame, obligations to moral standards are "absolutes" to be *accepted*. In the *chosen* family frame, moral standards are carefully crafted "guidelines" to be *adopted*. The *given* family member must learn to *comply with* obligations to moral standards while the *chosen* family member must learn to make *personalized commitments* to moral standards.[6]

In the given/strict family frame, the community is a family, the moral agent (counselor) is a parental authority, the moral obligation of the parental authority is the enforcement of standards, and the moral obligation of family members is obedience to parental authority. The counselor described earlier as moral agent and parental authority in this situation chose an appropriate path. The online bullying was clearly against the *given* moral values of the community, the students involved were obligated to uphold those values or suffer the consequences for their own good and the good of the whole, and the counselor as moral agent was obligated to enforce the consequences.

In the chosen/nurturant family frame, the community is a family, the moral agent is a nurturant parent, the moral obligation of the parent is consistent compassion and sacrifice in order to continue caring even under adverse circumstances, and the moral obligation of children is to internalize consistent parental empathy and negotiate accordingly. The counselor described earlier did not allow for the exploration of all parties' feelings and needs, nor did he allow space for specifying requests through negotiated caring and communication. Within the context of the graduate classroom and the high school community, these two frames with their distinctive entailments suggest different courses of action.

According to Lakoff, facts cannot fight frames. Since frames trump facts, a strict family frame will resist "facts" regarding the efficacy of negotiated commitment, and the nurturant family frame will resist "facts" about the efficacy of consistent enforcement. Lakoff suggests that the solution is not to supply skeptics with factual evidence, but to impose a different frame and use that new frame to identify, interpret, and resolve particular dilemmas. Since attempts to negate a frame actually work counter-intuitively to reinscribe that

frame, the new frame must be modeled successfully, reshaping the language of the debate in a way that continues to support the new metaphor.

SHARING HORIZONS

Thus, one option in the classroom is to offer a new frame in order to suggest the viability of a new metaphor. Another is to offer a new frame as a means for engaging in ongoing negotiation of competing frames. In support for negotiation within a cooperative community, Frank Fitch and Greg Loving introduce Gadamer's notion of shared horizons:

> [T]he educator has an ethical duty to both help establish a shared horizon of understanding and to open dialogue within that horizon….Once that shared horizon is established, though, the attitude and practice of openness, including competing and even conflicting ideas, forges the practice of critical inquiry.[7]

Gadamer's hermeneutic concept *fusion of horizons* can also be used to extend this practice of critical inquiry into a sense of being and belonging, as Joel Weinsheimer notes in *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*:

> There is an access of being in the same way as when, in a genuine conversation, something occurs to both partners that had not occurred to either of them before. When they come to understanding, something new is conceived. Something new happens, and what occurs in hermeneutic conversation is being. We come to realize that belonging is an ontological way of talking about the condition achieved by the fusion of horizons.[8]

For Gadamer "to acquire a horizon [of critical understanding] means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion." To critically understand something is to "understand it as the answer to a question," not as a steel-edged rhetorical weapon.[9] A fusion occurs when personal horizons merge with the horizons of texts or other interlocutors. In a reciprocal exchange, perspectives and prejudices are altered as all involved in the "game of understanding" place themselves "at risk" in pursuit of a truth that is greater than the wisdom possessed by any single "player."[10]

As Timothy Crusius observes, Gadamer's metaphor has some advantages the "frame" does not possess: "horizon is projective, unfolding ahead of us as our preunderstandings and understandings do, altering as our location alters, rather than being static like the metaphor of a framework."[11] Seeking a fusion of horizons requires a teacher to ask questions that have the potential of revealing students' pre-understandings. Referring explicitly to the Hegelian destruction-reconstruction "rhythm" in Gadamer's retrieval of G.W.F. Hegel's phenomenology, Crusius proposes "dialogue…as dialectic."[12] While the destructive and reconstructive rhythms of the dialectic suggest "violence" in

learning, Gadamer also speaks of the fusion of horizons as "a partial rapprochement between our present world, from which we can never hope to detach ourselves, and the different world we are seeking to appraise."[13] To understand a strange text, conversation, or society does not require that we destroy our own horizons in order to locate ourselves in another's place or in another's frame. We can put our relationships with tradition (horizons) "into play" without entirely relinquishing them.[14]

As we encounter strange and surprising conversations or texts, we are invited to step into the "game of truth" where our own horizons are themselves at risk. As our horizons (pre-understandings, possibilities and perceptual limitations) are brought more clearly into "seeing distance" or "hearing distance," they may be revealed as something other than what we previously believed them to be.[15] This is the gift of play that Gadamer offers in his description of human encounters with works of art:

> by means of which we enter the world-horizon which work opens up, not in such a way as to leave our own world behind, but in order to expose our world to it and come away transformed and enriched, that is to say, to effect the fusion of horizons.[16]

Playing the Game

The concept *fusion of horizons* has been applied successfully to investigations of constructed cultural and gender identity[17] and seems to be an ideal philosophical grounding for a graduate course exploring value alternatives in the development of "multicultural" understanding wherein "all voices can be heard."[18] If the gift of fusions is transformation and enrichment, why did graduate students and I have such difficulty in our attempted fusions of horizons across our distinctive frames? One possibility is that I underestimated the challenge such attempts at fusion pose for all of us. In his critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics, John Caputo points to the radical power of face-to-face encounters with others that he believes Gadamer does not fully acknowledge:

> It is clear that the face of the other is not a value posited by the will but an intervention from without, a command issued from the hidden depths of the other….something, who knows what, is at work, en-ergon—in play—here which we cannot bring within the horizon of our familiar constraints and convenient systems of placing. Stable structures shake loose, the whole trembles, the abyss opens up. We are brought tripping before the mystery.[19]

Instead of fostering a sense of belonging to a larger conversation, fusions of horizons can also disrupt our sense of the world, undercutting its solidity and stability. Caputo finds in such exposures to life's elusive mysteries, revelations, and withdrawals, a necessary "lesson in humility" that deflates "the pretensions of our schemes" and tempers our willingness to press them "to the last detail"

or to draw "blood on their behalf."[20] In addition to the enrichment of our world views through intercultural, multicultural, and cross cultural learning, fusions of horizons can bring into sharp relief the limitations of our own horizons, their finite borders, their webs of gossamer constructions, and the vastness of the flux that remains beyond our understanding.[21]

Along with the sense of disorientation that comes with the questioning of frames, there is a further potential disruption to the sense of self that is established within the frames that constitute these views. To return to Lakoff, the sense of self established in the strict parent (father) frame entails standard bearing and protecting; moral courses of action can be reasoned from this sense of self. Likewise, the sense of self in the nuturant parent frame entails continuous care and negotiation; moral courses of action can be reasoned from this ontological anchor as well. Not only are the limitations and partial natures of worldviews made manifest in fusions of horizons, but identities as agents within those world views are also challenged along with the reach of reason upon which the sense of self depends. A radical hermeneutics, like Caputo's, asserts that "the most reasonable view of reason denies that you can write a handbook about the way reason works. You have to learn to play the game."[22] For Caputo, taking ourselves and our reasons too seriously is a "fatal flaw" that puts "an end to play, an end to the discussion, so that any disagreement after this, after we get serious, will draw blood."[23]

Conclusion

How might explicit reference to metaphorical frames such as Lakoff and Ault's be useful in helping to attune our eyes and our ears to the pre-understandings that constitute our horizons? How might frames like those identified by Lakoff and Ault be used to facilitate discussions that lead not simply to dueling frames, but to fusions of horizons that keep our discussions about differences "in play"? Frames point to the power of metaphorical pre-understandings and emotionally laden forestructures, so often more compelling than any "factual" evidence that challenges them. Fusions point beyond the structures of frames to horizons that shift and reshape in the interplay of understanding. Understanding as a fusion of horizons may entail the identification of frames that define and separate us; but understanding as fusion also calls us to put our own horizons, our deepest meanings, back into play in hopes of finding more honest, humble, and humane metaphors to live by.

Notes

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 429 and 557.

2. Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life,* 2d ed. (Encinitas, Calif.: PuddleDancer Press, 2003). This book is replete with school, counseling, family, and political examples.

3. As Charles Bingham observes in a recent analysis of his own teaching choices, whether we like it or not, we are "the missing pages of the text" we teach. Drawing upon Gadamer's hermeneutics and Jacques Derrida's notion of the "supplement," Bingham locates pedagogy "in a tradition of putting the instructor in place of a parent, of supplementing parental teachings." Teaching authority that is not coercive is based on teacher knowledge "shored up by the books the teacher has read." Bingham offended at least one of his students by assigning a book he had not already read himself. His authority was not "shored up" by an unread text. My own inexperience with NVC and my obvious lack of skill with its processes may have diminished my "supplementary" authority as well. See Charles Bingham, "I Am the Missing Pages of the Text I Teach: Gadamer and Derrida on Teacher Authority," *Philosophy of Education 2001* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 265–72, 265, and 267.

4. George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004). See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenges* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). In *Metaphors We Live By,* Lakoff and Johnson contend that it is not possible to "give an account of truth in itself, free of human understanding." Instead they propose that "the theory of meaning and the theory of truth" be based on "a theory of understanding" with metaphor playing a central role (185).

5. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

6. James Ault, *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Doug Muder, "Red Family, Blue Family: Making Sense of the Values Issue," *UU World,* February, 2005.

7. Frank Fitch and Greg Loving "Conflict and Cooperation: Evil Twins or Fated Lovers? Pluralism and Classroom Community" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, Dayton Ohio, September 30, 2006), 5.

8. Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

9. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305 and 576.

10. Rudolf Bernet, "Gadamer on the Subject's Participation in the Game of Truth," *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2005), 785–814. In correspondence to Richard J. Bernstein in June, 1982, Gadamer examined his own limitations with respect to such risk taking, explaining, "I am concerned with the fact that the displacement of human reality never goes so far that no forms of solidarity

exist any longer.…that is what, in my opinion, is the basis for the possibility of practical philosophy. "A Letter by Hans-Georg Gadamer," Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 264.

11. Timothy W. Crusius, *A Teacher's Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991), 33. Crusius acknowledges problems with the fusion of horizons metaphor as well: "Three words commonly used in philosophical hermeneutics—situation, context, horizon—share implications that can seriously mislead. They imply a 'just-thereness,' whereas they are interpretations, implicitly as preunderstanding (forehaving, foreseeing, and foreconception), explicitly as understanding, assertions about the world. The three words also imply a fixity, whereas our being in the world is emergent, immanent, dynamic. Horizon has the further liability of being a visual metaphor, whereas philosophical hermeneutics tends to think of truth more as something we 'listen for' rather than 'look at.'" But he concludes that "If we hold on to the temporal implications of horizon, it will do" (33).

12. According to Crusius, "When Gadamer said that 'dialectic must retrieve itself in hermeneutics' (1976a, 99), he had in mind Hegel's dialectic, not Plato's.…by retrieving dialectic Gadamer means holding on to Hegel's phenomenology but discarding his metaphysics. Hegel's descriptions of the process of increasing self-understanding are very close to Gadamer's dialectic of experience, in that 'assertions' (horizons of meaning) are constantly challenged by the anomalous and by other, conflicting horizons, resulting optimally in a dialogical process akin to *Aufhebung,* a modifying-enlarging of horizons to encompass 'new matter.'" While Gadamer adopts Hegel's destruction-reconstruction rhythm in his own cycle of hope and disappointment, he does not adopt Hegel's method or teleology (Absolute Spirit). For Gadamer, the process of understanding is unpredictable and perpetual (Ibid., 83).

13. Gadamer, quoted in William Outhwaite, "Han-Georg Gadamer," in *The Return to Grand Theory in the Human Sciences,* ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7.

14. In Gadamer's fusion of horizons, we understand not as virgins, but as beings conceived "with the prejudices which constitute the historical reality of [our] being" (quotes in Outhwaite, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," 27). As Gadamer considered the limitations of his own "prejudices," he observed: "I live, as it were, in a closed horizon of problems and lines of questioning, which still understands itself to be philosophy, and which recognizes neither a social-scientific nor a skeptical questioning of philosophy itself" ("Letter by Hans-Georg Gadamer," 262).

15. Here we face Joseph Margolis's question about the "ontic structure of the self" and what exactly Gadamer's fusion might require of it. See Joseph Margolis, "Three Puzzles for Gadamer's Hermeneutics" in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 92–93.

16. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 113.

17. Charles Taylor, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Georgia Warnke, "Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer,* ed. Lorraine Code (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 57–80.

18. The Call for Proposals for the 2006 annual meeting of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, "Cultivating a Community of Interest: Building Bridges, Sharing Aims," envisioned a multidisciplinary, multicultural forum wherein all voices could be heard.

19. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics,* 276.

20. Ibid., 258–59.

21. This deepened understanding of limitations can be likened to Christiane Thompson's call for a "different theory of *Bildung*" with its partial revelations of the "borders" of ourselves and our views on the world. Addressing intercultural exchanges explicitly, Thompson notes that "Intercultural *Bildung* or learning is predominantly understood as an extension or enrichment of ourselves after engaging with a culturally different perspective which implies an appropriation of the alien's views. In contrast to such a process of incorporation, mastery, and accomplishment, we could instead focus on our *inability* to experience and understand the alien. Since our perspectives remain inextricably bound to the structures and categories of our own cultural and social background, we will never be able to grasp the alien as alien. By resisting our impulses to level out cultural difference, however, we might be able to bring into view the borders of our experience, for example, the imaginary constructions and/or ethnocentric constructions we have of the other. We can, in other words, relate to the inevitable entanglement of self and alien." See Christiane Thompson, "Adorno and the Border of Experience: The Significance of the Nonidentical for a 'Different' Theory of Bildung," *Educational Theory* 56, no. 1 (2006): 69–87, esp. 85.

22. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics,* 228.

23. Ibid., 258.