

پژوهش‌های فلسفی
نشریه دانشکده ادبیات و
علوم انسانی دانشگاه تبریز
سال ۵۱، بهار و تابستان ۸۷
شماره مسلسل ۲۰۳

The Method of Question and Answer as a Principle of Charity in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*

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Abstract

Principles of Charity have become central features of any plausible theory of interpretation. The trick has been to explain how the truth of the text to appear without abandoning one's critical resources in the process. I argue that Gadamer's discussion of "the logic of question and answer," when applied to textual interpretation, functions as a principle of charity provides the right balance between being too liberal and being too critical.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Principle of Charity, Interpretation, Rationality, David Vessey, Donald Davidson

* تاریخ وصول: ۸۷/۷/۲۷ تأیید نهایی: ۸۷/۹/۱۷

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The classic statement of “the principle of charity” reads, “the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject, the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree.”ⁱ Donald Davidson’s main point here belongs to a theory of meaning—within semantics, the truth value of a sentence is intimately connected to the truth value of other sentences, within a theory of interpretation, one can not attribute agreement or disagreement except against the background of significant agreement. The principle of charity is not, as Davidson quickly notes, a presumption of the rationality of those we are trying to understand. Rather the intuition behind the principle of charity is that if we interpret a sentence in such a way as to render it unintelligible, this is likely a sign of a poor interpretation rather than an accurate interpretation of an unintelligible view. From the start then, the distinction between rationality and intelligibility is at stake in such discussions. Let’s distinguish a wide from a narrow sense of “intelligible.” In the wide sense, an intelligible sentence is one we could understand a person uttering at some time or other for some reason or other. In the narrow sense, a sentence is intelligible if it is simply meaningful in a language. Certainly the latter is independent of the truth of the sentence, but so is the wide sense of intelligible and, indeed, so is rationality. Given these distinctions between narrow intelligibility, wide intelligibility, rationality, and truth what exactly does the principle of charity require us to ascribe to that (or those) we are trying to understand? If we are going to understand another’s views—views which are in principle foreign to us for otherwise interpretation is not necessary—, do we need to assume the other speaks the truth, or speaks rationally, or simply speaks intelligibly? Davidson would seem to suggest that intelligibility is what must result from charitable interpretations— the “point of the principle of charity is to make the speaker intelligible”ⁱⁱ—though he will also claim that “if we want to understand others we must count them right in most matters”ⁱⁱⁱ, which would suggest ascribing truth. In addition, the act might be intelligible although the statement itself isn’t. Someone in delirious state might spew effectively random words and thus speak unintelligibly, but his/her actions are themselves intelligible—in fact they might be exactly what we would expect given the circumstances.^{iv} Since any action—even the most seemingly rational—can be interpreted as intelligible simply by presuming the

irrationality of the agent, we need to ascribe more than mere intelligibility for an interpretation to be charitable. Yet, at the other extreme we need not ascribe truth. No principle should require us to adopt the interpretive stance that others could not be wrong in their beliefs. We need to preserve the possibility of the claim: I understand the belief, and it is false. Elucidating some of the complexities of this middle ground between ascribing intelligibility and ascribing truth is part of the goal of this paper. We will present some illuminating examples to reveal the problems of establishing charitable interpretations and then look at Hans Georg-Gadamer's suggested hermeneutical solution to this problem: understanding everything as an answer to a question. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a philosopher who has written so much on interpretation and understanding would be able to make a contribution to the debate, but, in fact, his views have never been articulated in the context of the problems surrounding the principle of charity. Not only will looking at Gadamer's views in this new light help us understand the principle of charity better, it will reveal an often elusive source of a common anxiety over Gadamer's hermeneutics. At the end we will suggest a modification to Gadamer's view which dispels the anxiety.

The problem of ascribing truth can be put differently. For all the charity which we believe we must put into an understanding of another person's views, we do not want to rule out being able to make three critical claims. (1) They were wrong; their belief is false. Consider one of the more famous Paduan responses to Galileo's discovery of the moons ("wandering stars") around Jupiter:

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of the head . . . What are these parts of the microcosmos? Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears and a mouth. So, in the heavens as in a macrocosmos, there are two favorable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of the planets is necessarily seven.^v

Whatever our strategies for understanding this belief we should not have to rule out the conclusion, “The Paduan philosophers ‘gather’ wrong. There are not exactly seven planets so there are not necessarily exactly seven planets.” (2) Their inference is invalid; their reasoning is faulty. In the previous example, the motivating inference principle appears to be “Nature is everywhere organized in sevens.” Not only is that not a reliable principle of inference, that there are nine planets in the solar system is an obvious counterexample. Finally, (3) we understand what they were saying better than they did. Gadamer has gone so far as to say that we always understand more than the author about the meaning of the work. “Not just occasionally but always the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.”^{vi} Hindsight can have interpretive advantages.

Although it may be surprising to think we might put ourselves in a position to not be able to make the previous three critical claims, features of the principle of charity push us towards that conclusion. Or at least, which is just as bad, features push us towards the conclusion that these critical judgments must be infinitely forestalled until further evidence. For example, one way to “charitably” interpret the statement of the Paduans would be to suggest that in some form or other they were not making a truth claim about the number of planets. Perhaps, instead of contradicting Galileo, they were merely taking the opportunity to express and reaffirm their commitment to an ordered universe. Such an interpretation might put the Paduans in a better light—after all they weren’t really denying there were more than seven planets—, but by interpreting them as not making any truth claim we automatically rule out the possibility of them being wrong, or right.

Consider the following two claims: 1. Giants created the world, 2. A mnipotent God created the world. Charles Taylor says about the first,

We try to interpret this myth, to explain the power it had in this culture, why it became this origin myth. But we never consider that there might have been giants. I’m not complaining of the narrowness of our perspective, just pointing out that our whole search for an explanation presupposes that there were no giants. If there were, then the myth has a quite different and much simpler explanation.^{vii}

In looking for the way the claim “giants created the earth” expresses the mythological understanding of the time, we preclude its possibility of being the bearer of a truth claim. Notice what we naturally do not do, then, is look for evidence of creation by giants. Rather we dismiss such claims as not making genuine truth claims. Take the second statement, however. Should we analyze it as a truth claim? Or is it merely an expression of something in the human spirit which moves us to seek something higher?^{viii} How does the principle of charity function in determining which attitude to take towards the claim that there is a God? Here, more so than in the case of the giants, we can recognize that there is something manifestly uncharitable in saying, for example, that Thomas Aquinas’ belief in God was an expression of his desire for order. Surely Aquinas would be appalled to have such a view ascribed to him; he believes God created the world and he believes that that belief is more than an expression of awe, it is true. What is going on here? Why do we treat these cases differently? Is it because we recognize that there are rational people who believe in God’s existence? What about the claim that the universe was created 4004 years ago? Oddly enough, it may be more charitable to claim that Aquinas is wrong (if you think he’s wrong), than to claim that what he is saying is “true” in the sense of being a legitimate expression of the awe inspiring mystery of the universe. But then a principle of charity may require us—*as an act of respect*—to judge a view false. An odd consequence, but one which should follow from any acceptable version of the principle of charity

Gadamer provides us which a hermeneutical ploy intended to steer us through these problems (surprisingly methodological given his emphasis on the non-methodological acquisition of truth).

I believe I have rather persuasively shown in *Truth and Method* that the understanding of what is spoken must be thought of in terms of the dialogical situation, and that means ultimately in terms of the dialectic of question and answer. That is always in the situation in which one makes oneself understood, and through which one articulates the world both sides hold in common. I have

moved a step beyond the logic of question and answer as Collingwood had developed it, in that not only does one's world orientation, as he held, find expression in what develops between the speaking of a question and answer; it also happens to us from the side of the things that are the topic of the conversation. That is to say, the subject matter "raises questions." Likewise question and answer play back and forth [both ways] between the text and its interpreter.^{ix}

The logical relationship established between a question and an answer is central to much of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Before we consider it as a version of the principle of charity, let's lay out some historical and philosophical foundations of hermeneutics.

"Hermeneutics", classically, means "interpretation." Hermes was the messenger of the Gods, and hermeneutics is the study of the issues surrounding the transfer of meaning—articulation, communication, interpretation, and understanding. Aristotle's *Peri Hermenēia* is a treatise on the connections between language, thought, and the world; in Plato's *Symposium* Diotima calls Eros a *hermenēuon*—one of the "messengers who shuttle back and forth between the [mortals and the immortals] conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to God, while to men they bring commands from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices."^x But philosophical hermeneutics—a tradition of thought centered around the claim that questions of interpretation are the central philosophical questions—originated quite recently. Fredreich Schleiermacher is often considered the first thinker to present a systematic presentation of the scope and relevance of hermeneutic concerns. He argued that the true preoccupation with legal and Biblical interpretation falls under a general (and, he thought, ultimately scientific) methodology of interpretation. He also first properly presented the "hermeneutic circle": the act of reconstructing meaning always follows "the hermeneutic principle that just as a whole is, of course, understood from its parts, so too the individual can only be understood from the whole."^{xi} Schleiermacher was a theologian and his main concern was how the Bible

can still communicate God's word even though it was written in cultural context entirely different from nineteenth century Germany. His conclusion was that the stories and events of the Bible were expressions of the will of God, so their interpretation preserves their role as the expression of God's plan.^{xii} Moreover, echoing Hegel, he saw historical events as expressions of the progress of the Holy Spirit. Ideas, again *à la* Hegel, belong to stages of consciousness of the *Heilige Geist*.^{xiii}

Interpreting everything as an expression of the Holy Spirit mirrors our above interpretation that the Paduan's claim should be understood as an expression of reverence towards divine order within creation. The problem with such an interpretation, as we have seen, is that it effectively rules out the three critical claims we argued the principle of charitable interpretation should allow. Not only does it preclude the possibility of judging their view to be false, it precludes the possibility of accepting the truth of the statement. Gadamer draws out this point through a comparison between reading a the text and having a dialogue with others.

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to. This is the parallel to the hermeneutical experience. I must allow tradition's claim to validity, not in these sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me.^{xiv}

To be truly open to the validity of what is presented, "a hermeneutic virtue" Gadamer says elsewhere, requires one to take up the possibility that the claim is true. Gadamer sees this openness preserved essentially in every genuine question. To ask a genuine question (as opposed to a "slanted" question) is to attempt to bring meaning into the open; its end is articulation, not refutation.

In contrast to Schleiermacher, Gadamer calls the interpretive strategy which allows for the claim to “speak” to us “the logic of question and answer.”^{xv} To understand a claim we should conceive of it as a potential answer to a question. By placing the claim in that context—in “the horizon of the question”—we come to understand why someone might make that claim at that point in time. The trick, then, becomes finding the right question to which the claim is a legitimate answer. At first glance, Gadamer’s seemingly simple solution looks like a shell game. At the very least one might argue that it simply shifts the issue of interpretation from the claim over to the question to which the claim is an answer without solving any of the interpretive difficulties. More problematically, it would seem that deciding on the appropriate question presupposes rather than establishes the recognition of the meaning of the claim. Before addressing these concerns, let’s see what this interpretive strategy offers in terms of our initial categories of wide intelligibility, narrow intelligibility, rationality, and truth. The progress made by Gadamer’s simple suggestion is significant. Reconstructing a question to which the claim is an answer always establishes not only the wide (and thus narrow) intelligibility of the view—which is presupposed as a condition for the possibility of finding an appropriate question—but the rationality of the view (at least in the minimal sense of being a potential answer to a genuine question). Thus, using Gadamer’s strategy of question and answer, we always grant our interlocutor intelligibility and rationality, and leave open the judgment of truth and falsity. But there is still the problem of picking the question.

Recall the claim “Giants created the world.” This can be understood as an answer to an infinite number of questions ranging from the trivial (“What kind of beings created the world?”) to the obscure (“What is the title of your favorite B-movie?”) to the silly (“What sentence can be made out of the letters insraeteoldrwhdtectag?”).^{xvi} More realistically, consider these two questions: “What claim will celebrate the new science, yet still keep you from getting persecuted by the 16th century Church?” and “What claim celebrates the new science, but still shows the necessity for scientists to believe in God?” Descartes’ claim that we only acquire certainty if we believe God exists answers both questions, but whichever question we pick will have profound impact on how we understand this and other

Cartesian views. At stake is Descartes' commitment to Christianity—whether he believes in God or whether he is bluffing for the Church.

The natural answer to the problem of finding the best question is to seek to discover what question was in the mind of the author at the time the claim was made. Gadamer rejects this solution. It is not only a notoriously difficult historical project, but it is based on a mistaken account of meaning—the idea that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the intentions of its author.^{xvii} Instead Gadamer will insist that the only legitimate questions suitable for reconstructing meaning are those which could actually engage us.

We understand only when we understand the question to which something is the answer, but the intention behind what is understood in this way does not remain foregrounded against our own intention. Rather, reconstructing the question to which the meaning of a text is understood as an answer merges with our questioning. For a text must be understood as an answer to a real question.^{xviii}

To see the claim as an answer to a question is to understand it in the context of possible answers to the question and, always at the same time, to see ourselves as taking up a stance among the possible answers. Crucial to Gadamer's point is the view that "to understand a question means to ask it."^{xix} A claim made by another person need not engage us to be understood, but a question posed by another person needs to be thought through to be understood. Often the argument is made that we need to be open to the possible truth of views different from ours (a primitive form of the principle of charity), but it is not clear that a consideration of the possibility of the truth of different viewpoints actually engages one in the end. After all, a reflectively held view would be one in which many of the alternatives already have been considered and rejected. Thus to introduce a new view becomes merely, and appropriately, an occasion for revisiting the reasons for believing what we believe in the first place. The intention of this view-based insistence on openness is to raise

critical questions about one's own views, but it rarely succeeds. A strength of Gadamer's insistence that to be open to a new text requires understanding it as the answer to a question is that the procedure requires us to raise questions. Now granted it may be that the questions raised are already familiar ones, and ones to which we already have an answer. But given that we are concerned exclusively with texts whose meaning is uncertain, it's likely that we will find ourselves asking questions we had not previously asked. The "horizon of the question" becomes the locus for the encounter with difference, not the claim itself.

In addition to the question engaging us, the question needs to arise from the claim itself. Gadamer does not back away from the co-determination of question and answer. In fact, in the first quotation we saw above he says it is his great improvement over Collingwood to see that the text introduces questions for us just as we introduce questions to make sense of the text.

The most important thing is the question that the text puts to us. . . . The voice that speaks to us from the past—whether text, work, trace—itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask the questions. We must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditional text is the answer. . . . [R]econstructing the question to which the meaning of a text is understood as an answer merges with our own questioning.^{xx}

Although it is perhaps no longer obvious, Gadamer's priority of the question is a direct legacy of Schleiermacher's Biblical hermeneutics. For Schleiermacher, the Bible is supposed to speak to us in our present situation. For Gadamer, the text always speaks to us in the present (if it speaks to us at all); to reconstruct the meaning without engaging the question raised is to fail to understand the text. The problem with the continuity from Schleiermacher to Gadamer on this point, is that the Holy Spirit is what makes it possible for the Bible to communicate to all people at all

times, while Gadamer has no recourse to such theological guarantees. How does Gadamer come to the conclusion that everything foreign has something to ask us?

Gadamer never does justify this conclusion. Indeed, the most repeated criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that it too conservative. Not only does "the logic of question and answer" from the start posit every claim as a rational claim, but it insists that the claim be considered a legitimate answer to a genuine question. As a result, Gadamer's version of the principle of charity precludes us from concluding that a particular text addresses a question which is no longer relevant. Such a conclusion should not be precluded. Take, for example, Duns Scotus' theory of haecceities. Scotus rejects Thomas' Aristotelian claim that matter individuates compound substances on the grounds that it would follow that every angel, as an immaterial being, would have its own unique form. But this is absurd, so there must be some other thing, Scotus calls it a haecceity, which is formally distinct from the form of the substance and serves to individuate it from other substances. What, on Gadamer's view, are we to make of this claim? Surely the question to which Scotus' doctrine is an answer—How are angels individuated?— is no longer widely considered a genuine question. So, on Gadamer's account, we need to devise a new question which both engages us and has the doctrine of haecceities as a reasonable solution. Now as it turns out questions of individuation are prominent in metaphysics, but it is odd to think that to understand Scotus' claim we need to engage debates of contemporary metaphysics. In fact, many historians of philosophy rightly protest when ancient debates are recast in contemporary terms. But isn't this precisely the consequence of requiring that the "horizon of question" be a genuine one?

The problem here is that Gadamer has too quickly dismissed the actual, historical question which motivated the view in favor of a question which engages us. It is certainly true that texts can raise questions which their authors never intended and which are quite different from those questions the text was written to answer, but the consequence need not be the elimination of the historical question from the process of understanding. Acknowledging meaning as going beyond intention does not warrant eliminating intention from the determination of meaning. A case in point: listening to another person (and Gadamer constantly uses

conversation as the model for the relation to texts) requires that we work to understand what the person intends to mean by the words he/she is using. Anything else avoids the concreteness of the conversation occurring at this particular place and this particular time with this particular person. Ironically given Gadamer's philosophical orientation, what is required is a greater sensitivity to historical difference and a greater willingness to let that difference be preserved when finding an appropriate question to understand a claim.

But with that caveat in place, Gadamer's "logic of question and answer" provides us with a version of the principle of charity which navigates between ascriptions of intelligibility and rationality and ascriptions of truth. Questions about the ascription of rationality fall away once we treat something as an answer to a question, and finding the appropriate question becomes a matter of addressing the text to attempt to determine what questions the author him- or herself was attempting to address. Gadamer, in this modified form, provides for the possibility of genuinely charitable interpretations without foreclosing those critical resources we seek to preserve.

Endnotes

ⁱ- Donald Davidson *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984) p. 137.

ⁱⁱ- Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 316.

ⁱⁱⁱ- Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 196.

^{iv}- [Name withheld for submission] has pointed out to me that some seemingly unintelligible speech acts are, in fact, rational acts. His example is one in which the speaker purposely says something unintelligible in order to throw someone off. If there is an axe-murderer at the door, inquiring about a victim, and you say "dshfdsiufsfhshdhshkhdk", the act is intelligible. In this case, you may want to give the axe-murderer reason to believe you're insane, and not to press you for the whereabouts of the potential victim. Of course what I am trying to show here is that ascriptions of intelligibility do not yet seem to rise to the level of charity as they are consistent with ascribing irrationality (or insanity).

^v- quoted in S. Warhaft, *Francis Bacon: A Selection of his Works* (Toronto, 1965), p. 17

^{vi}- *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), p. 296. This is a common hermeneutic claim, though the reason why the claim is true varies dramatically depending on the theory of the role of the author in the establishment of the meaning of the text.

^{vii}- *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), p 153.

^{viii}- And why do I naturally include the word "merely" in this case? It did not occur to me to say that the claim "Giants created the world" is "merely" understood as a mythological feature of that society.

^{ix}- *The Philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer*. Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. XXIV (Chicago: Open Court Press), p. 43

^x- 203b, Nehamas/Woodruff translation. The classic source for the history of hermeneutics remains Gadamer's *Truth and Method* though there are more recent, and often more detailed, histories. See Maurizio Ferraris' *History of Hermeneutics*

tr. Luca Somigli (Humanities Press, 1996) and Jean Grondin's *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* tr. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Neither of these histories diverge significantly from Gadamer's.

^{xi}- *Hermeneutik* (Heidelberg : C. Winter, 1974), p. 149

^{xii}- He writes, "True historical significance rises above history. Phenomena exist, like miracles, only to direct our attention towards the Spirit that playfully attends them." Quoted in Wilhelm Dilthey's, *Aus Schleiermachers Leben* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1860) p. 117.

^{xiii}- When decidedly un-Christian ideas dominated, they still functioned as that which against a more sophisticated Christian idea emerges. In such a manner, Hegel's dialectical history can be analogously understood as an intellectual theodicy.

^{xiv} *Truth and Method*, p. 361

^{xv} Gadamer's phenomenological pedigree is evident in his attempt to make meaning present. The logic of question and answer, then, serves the same function as Husserl's transcendental reduction.

^{xvi}- One concern about these examples is that they are cases where the answer is not about giants but about the English sentence "Giants created the world." But that is precisely one problem of interpretation and reflects the core concerns about what counts as a charitable interpretation.

^{xvii}- "We can set aside Schleiermacher's ideas on subjective interpretation. When we try to understand a text we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author's mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which the author has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right." (*Truth and Method*, p. 292)

^{xviii}- *Truth and Method* p. 374

^{xix}- *Truth and Method* p. 375

^{xx}- *Truth and Method* p. 374