

Extending Gadamer's Corrective:  
*No Child Left Behind* and Hermeneutic Conversation

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Why has education become equated with achievement, measured by scores on standardized tests? Why has educational equity come to be framed exclusively in terms of school choice? Why have teachers been cast as "recalcitrant 'worker bees,'" rather than professionals who understand context and individualized instruction?

These questions, Linda O'Neill explains, are raised by school leaders in response to *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). NCLB is problematic, not only because its "single-minded focus on results" truncates educational practices and aims. Bedazzled by promises of objective certainty procured by scientific method, NCLB proponents seek uncontested facts about the ends and means of schooling. In so doing, they claim to resolve or at least circumvent the conflicts and ever-changing goals that perennially bedevil schooling. NCLB thereby thwarts public conversation about the role of education in a pluralistic democracy.

According to O'Neill, Hans-Georg's Gadamer's hermeneutics provides "the truth of a corrective" to the strategy NCLB assumes. Gadamer's corrective "carves out a space" in which citizens can engage in face-to-face dialogue about the means and ends of education. Whereas scientific technical knowledge proffers pre-determined goals and assurances for meeting them, the practical wisdom of hermeneutic conversation reminds us that planning reason is limited. The security that scientific technique promises is false: our situation *is* ambiguous. Rather than try to escape ambiguity by ceding decisions to experts, democracy requires individuals to deliberate together to take collective responsibility for educational policy.

O'Neill's insightful analysis of Gadamer exposes key assumptions in NCLB and presents a vision of civic life that seems more in line with our ordinary instincts about the way decisions should be made in a healthy democracy. With this in mind, I invite O'Neill to think further about two issues to which her paper alludes. The first issue concerns the marriage of science and technology defined as obsessive pursuit of managerial control over social policy. Does Gadamer believe science is complicit in this quest? Or does he believe that scientific inquiry resists this obsession? The second issue concerns hermeneutic civic conversation. Who participates in this conversation, and what does participation entail? Is hermeneutic conversation sufficient to combat or moderate NCLB?

Turning to the question of whether science promotes or challenges the obsession to control social policy, O'Neill argues that according to Gadamer, science perpetuates the idea that policy decisions can and should be methodologically regulated. "Gadamer is willing to accept the concept of a science that has certainty as its ideal and isolating causes as its purpose, in all its methodological strictness," O'Neill writes. Believing it can systematically isolate causes and insure certain conclusions, science forgets that it is grounded in socio-historical practices that

cannot be completely formalized. Ignoring its roots in messy lived experience, science encourages the idea that it is possible to discover self-evident ends that are beyond interpretive dispute. This belief is misguided, Gadamer maintains. Insofar as social practices escape thematization and theoretical explanation, they can't be managed or controlled to satisfy ends, which themselves are not subject to negotiation or critique.

While the link between science and obsessive control features prominently in Gadamer's writings, this view of science is not monolithic. Consider this claim, for example:

The explanatory power of science is tremendous....Nevertheless...we may all ask whether too much is demanded of science and whether it can play the principal role in so many questions of public life requiring decision...To hold science responsible, just because there is the threat of a misuse of its findings, appears to me to be unfair.<sup>1</sup>

On this view, scientists do not lust after unambiguous findings. *We do. We are the ones who try to make the scientist "into someone who can give us true directions for acting because of his superior knowledge and the superiority of his experience."*<sup>2</sup> Gadamer believes we put scientists in this position, because "people want to know how large the uncertainty factor really is."<sup>3</sup> Taking responsibility for determining our own direction is hard. It compels us to admit that outcomes can be ambiguous and that our conclusions may be risky or mistaken.

The picture Gadamer offers here is insightful with respect both to human frailty and to science. "[H]ermeneutic reflection has manifested itself everywhere in the practice of science," Gadamer acknowledges.<sup>4</sup> By this, Gadamer means not only that scientists realize that unarticulated pre-suppositions inform their work. Scientists also recognize that their pre-suppositions and conclusions *may be wrong*. Gadamer explains,

Thereby we have encountered the original, human, and fundamental meaning of science....It is that place where opinions do not count but only reasons. What an enormous demand on the weakness of humans, all of whom so very much love their own opinions and being right in discussions.<sup>5</sup>

Insofar as scientists are disposed to open their conclusions to critical scrutiny, they exhibit the sort of virtue that Gadamer's civic engagement demands. Scientists therefore should not be excluded from conversations about educational goals. To the contrary: scientists are participants in this debate, not because their contributions are uncontested, but because they remind us that critical reflection depends on a willingness to listen to the perspectives of those who challenge us. Gadamer says,

What is at issue here is that when something other or different is understood, then we must also concede something, yield — in certain limits, to the truth of the other,...That is the essence, the soul of my hermeneutics: To understand someone else is to see the justice, the truth of their position. And that is what transforms us.<sup>6</sup>

Gadamer's more sophisticated view of science fleshes out the contours of a civic space that allows practical wisdom and hermeneutic conversation to flourish. In such a space, individuals listen to and learn from one another. Biases are more likely to surface when interlocutors open them to refutation. A hermeneutically

oriented society thus commits us to two principles. Following David Ingram, we can call these principles reciprocity and charity. Reciprocity "requires treating one's interlocutor with equal respect," Ingram writes. Charity "requires regarding one's interlocutor as reasonable, or as communicating claims that merit presumption of coherence and truth."<sup>7</sup>

But if charity and reciprocity are the principles of hermeneutic civic space, then we must admit that not only scientists have a role in civic debates. Proponents of NCLB must be included as well. In a genuine hermeneutic conversation, NCLB opponents ask, What can supporters of NCLB teach me about the limits of my own position? Does NCLB express principles or values that illuminate disputes about education, the history of which implicates us all? A charitable approach might regard NCLB as promulgating long-standing concern for individual choice and self-determination. NCLB, moreover, is not the first time Americans have appealed to professional expertise to remove politics from education. NCLB proponents might be regarded as realists in the tradition of early-twentieth century progressives, who believed education was too important to leave to the vagaries of public debate.<sup>8</sup>

One might argue that conversing with NCLB supporters makes a bargain with the devil. Can one hope to preserve the public space by debating with people who believe that withdrawing from this space is a serious option? Insofar as hermeneutic conversation promotes mutual self-criticism, we might reply that those who promote withdrawal at all costs would come to see that this position is self-defeating. Learning from those who value the general welfare might temper extreme versions of individual choice. In this way, consensus about a middle position might be reached. Such a consensus, Georgia Warnke writes, "would be the result, not of bitter compromise but of genuine education on both sides."<sup>9</sup>

Taken to its logical conclusion, Gadamer's corrective envisions a space where all citizens, including scientists and NCLB supporters, come together to debate the proper ends of education. On this view, critical weaknesses in *any* position can be surfaced by means of dialogue rooted in solidarity and trust. Some regard debates about education as one of the few remaining sites we have for engaging in the kind of conversation that is formative of democratic community.<sup>10</sup>

Is this enough? Rather than hermeneutic conversation, some maintain that our current situation demands critical reflection, aided by insights from theoretical explanation and methodological rationality distanced from everyday understanding. This orientation seeks to uncover not only psychological reasons to explain why individuals abdicate decision-making power. It also illuminates economic, political, and cultural structures that capitalize on human weakness, repress or mask distortion, and entrench certain interests. Suspicion, not trust, fuels this approach. It does not assume that everyone offers a position from which we can or should learn.

I do not think this approach obviates hermeneutic conversation. It does, however, balance hermeneutic possibilities by recognizing the limits of this orientation. In so doing, it productively extends Gadamer's corrective. I am curious to know if O'Neill agrees.

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1. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 182 and 187.
  2. *Ibid.*, 184.
  3. *Ibid.*, 183.
  4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 552.
  5. Misgeld and Nicholson, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 19.
  6. *Ibid.*, 152.
  7. David Ingram, "Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and David Sherman (New York: Blackwell, 2003), 221.
  8. David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
  9. Georgia Warnke, *Justice and Interpretation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 163.
  10. See, for example, David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, "Conflict and Consensus in American Public Education," *Daedalus* 110, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 1-26.