A Dialogue on Courage:
Moral Education in Gadamerian Conversation

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As a testament to his commitment to dialogue, Séamus Mulryan's thought-provoking treatment of courage and *phronesis* serves as the beginning, and not the end, of a promising conversation — even if the tidiness of his conclusions might mask this fact. With *phronetic* deftness that avoids both excess and deficiency, Mulryan locates the mean between self-affirmation and self-renunciation in order to find a virtue fit for Gadamerian dialogue. His refashioning of courage is meant to address a lacuna in Hans-Georg Gadamer's appropriation of *phronesis*. Though Gadamer utilizes *phronesis* to accentuate the "in-between-ness" of interpreter and text, of the universal and the particular, Mulryan believes that Gadamer ignores its moral implications. For *phronesis* is unique among the intellectual virtues in its dependence on moral virtue. *Phronesis* is more than simply being clever; rather, the *phronimos* possesses the ability to reason correctly *with the right desire*. To fill this void in Gadamer's use of *phronesis*, Mulryan develops courage as a moral virtue that transcends both the Aristotelian heroism of a warrior faced with his own or his enemy's demise and Paul Tillich's notion of existential self-affirmation in spite of non-being. Courage, Mulryan asserts, is the ability to face the "anxiety of the unintelligibility of the self" through the affirmation of both the self and the other in dialogue.

One of the strengths of Mulryan's concept of courage is its striking resemblance to hermeneutic sensibilities generally associated with Gadamerian dialogue. Though Gadamer does not give it a name in *Truth and Method*, there is ample evidence of his appreciation for the kind of openness that Mulryan demands of the courageous. For example, Gadamer commends the ability to "look beyond what is close at hand,"[1] to "seek one's own in the alien" (*TM*, 15), and to have an "openness to the other" that "involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so" (*TM*, 361). In later works, Gadamer refers to this ability as good will.

Gadamer also shares Mulryan's Heideggerian view of the ultimate unintelligibility of the self. Gadamer acknowledges that understanding always entails risk, that our ontic demise is inevitable, and that, as finite beings, we can never attain self-certainty. He attributes the source of our anxiety to the nature of language itself. Language creates space in our environment to "think something and at the same time hold certain possibilities open."[2] But rather than dwell on what it is about being human that is groundless and unintelligible, Gadamer prefers to emphasize what it is about being human that is retained and made intelligible in conversation. Through an embrace of the finite and fragile aspects of being human, Gadamer salvages common ground from the rubble of contingency. While Martin Heidegger might interpret this sort of coping as inauthentic, Gadamer reminds us that the inauthentic also belongs to our nature.

Despite the similarities between the views of Gadamer and Mulryan, Gadamer stops short of explicitly developing a moral virtue for dialogue, as Mulryan does. Why? Gadamer certainly is not unaware of the moral import of *phronesis*. After all, he acknowledges that *phronesis* is a "determination of moral being" (*TM*, 22). Rather, I believe that Gadamer is sensitive to the problems that emerge when one prescribes ethical preconditions for dialogue that are decontextualized from the circumstances of the dialogue itself. Because many paths to dialogue exist, Gadamer would find Mulryan's emphasis on courage to be misplaced.

Consider Gadamer's treatment of good will. Instead of articulating good will in the specific language of moral virtue, Gadamer prefers to interpret it as a precondition of all human understanding. If one understands at all, one must put one's prejudices in play. Although Gadamer's personal inclinations have occasionally led him to give moral force to his general hermeneutic theory, he never goes so far as to espouse a normative program that prescribes the ethical conditions of authentic dialogue. Yet this was precisely the charge that Jacques Derrida leveled against Gadamer when he accused him of espousing a "good will" that masks, in its open-ended reasonableness, a demand for "absolute commitment to the desire for consensus in understanding." Not only does this demand do violence to the other, argued Derrida, but it also relies on a "will" that "becomes the ultimate determination," a "willing subjectivity." Gadamer, Derrida quipped, cannot resist the desire to "integrate a psychoanalytic hermeneutics into a general hermeneutics."[3]

Gadamer's response to Derrida is telling. He begins by asserting that his notion of "good will" is not Kantian. Rather, it is simply the observation that we must seek to strengthen our interlocutors' claims so that "what the other person has to say becomes illuminating." "Such an attitude," he adds, "seems essential to me for any understanding at all to come about. This is nothing more than an observation. It has nothing to do with an 'appeal,' and nothing at all to do with ethics. Even immoral beings try to understand one another."[4]

A useful distinction can be drawn between the inherent risk of dialogue and the conscious acknowledgement of this risk as we enter dialogue. A similar distinction exists between holding the view that the claims of both self and other must interact if we are to understand at all and prescribing a commitment to affirm the claims of self and other as a moral prerequisite to dialogue. Mulryan's concept of courage seems to turn on the latter, but it remains an open question whether such a position is necessary or desirable.

Before addressing this question, however, it might be useful to establish what is meant here by dialogue. Mulryan sometimes suggests that dialogue entails a courage that "sustains the power of each one's claims" as a way to face the anxiety of the unintelligibility of self. Elsewhere, he places emphasis on the partners themselves; we must withstand anxiety by maintaining "the integrity of both dialogical participants."

Gadamer is less ambiguous on this score. He conceives of dialogue as a triadic relationship bound by question and answer. It is neither the self nor her interlocutor

that drives dialogue, but rather the subject matter, and the questions educed from it. The subject of dialogue serves as common ground between dialogical partners and provokes in them a pursuit of the truth of the matter. The question and answer structure of dialogue is sustained by language. "What emerges in its truth is the *logos*, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know" (*TM*, 368). Mulryan's claim that "to foreground one's own prejudices" requires that "someone else asserts herself in her own separate validity" is therefore a misreading of Gadamer because it is not a "someone" but rather a "something" that asserts its validity (*TM*, 299). The "other" in dialogue is not the interlocutor per se, but the claims that confront both participants in discourse.

Beyond its dissolution of the Cartesian subject, there is something unsettling about this way of conceptualizing dialogue. It seems right to assert the centrality of the partners in exchange. But even if we follow Mulryan in maintaining "the integrity of both dialogical participants," it is not clear what integrity means here. Does not dialogue potentially lead to both the death and the renewal of selves? Does not it entail risk precisely because the integrity of our old selves is at stake?

Even if we could establish what we mean by the integrity of selves, the question remains whether courage is the right desire for dialogue. Though we may be called on occasion to courageously face our fear of existential death, more often than not we are drawn into dialogue by other motivations and forces, such as the search for the Beautiful, the sharp blow of incomprehension or denial, or the passion of one's interlocutor. "A genuine conversation," remarks Gadamer, "is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it" (*TM*, 383). This does not invalidate Mulryan's conception of courage so much as it reminds us of its contingency.

It appears that both Gadamer and Mulryan find in dialogue the very quintessence of what it is to be human. The question then is not only what normative entanglements this conception of dialogue entails, but also what normative entanglements themselves do to dialogue. It is easy to see how moral educators could be torn between the temptation to cultivate a desire or habit of dialogue along the lines suggested by Mulryan and the more circuitous but, paradoxically, also the more direct path favored by Gadamer that entices us all into dialogue simply with a question. In conclusion, I thank Mulryan for raising a question of his own: Is the conversation that Gadamer says we are having only a dim shadow of the conversation that we should be having?

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1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 305. This work will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 157.

3. Jacques Derrida, "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter,* eds. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989), 52–53.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reply to Jacques Derrida," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction,* eds. Michelfelder and Palmer, 55.