

Historical Understanding and “The Blemish of Extraordinary Moral Legacies”

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INTRODUCTION

In his famous 1963 letter to his fifteen year-old nephew, James Baldwin charges white Americans with a crime for which he says “neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them:” namely that “they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”¹ More recently, Charles Mills convicts white Americans of what he calls “white ignorance,”² and in his 2015 letter to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates calls white Americans “Dreamers.” “Hope for them,” he tells his son. “Pray for them if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion.”³ For Baldwin, Mills, and Coates, the ignorance to which white Americans are tied is a version of United States history that marginalizes or simply omits the experiences of African Americans and other people of color. What position is given in the standard public history of the United States to, for example, the thefts of Native American, Hispanic, and African American lands, Native American genocide, the horrors of slavery, the extent of lynching as a policy of racial domination and white violence against communities of color? When part of the 2014 revised framework for Advanced Placement courses in U.S. history sought to catalogue the way “various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial and ethnic identities,”⁴ critics took aim. A group of historians lambasted what it saw as the move from American identity to plural identities and said that “the new [2014] framework is so populated with examples of American history as the conflict between social groups, and so inattentive to the sources of national unity and cohesion, that it is hard to see how students will gain any coherent idea of what those sources might be.” They continued, “Gone is the idea that history should provide a

fund of compelling stories about exemplary people and events. No longer will students hear about America as a dynamic and exemplary nation, flawed in many respects, but whose citizens have striven through the years toward the more perfect realization of its professed ideals.”⁵

Critics of the 2014 framework for A.P. history courses defend an exceptionalist conception of the United States as a morally superior nation. While it has sometimes strayed from its path – say, in its treatment of Native Americans, slavery, Jim Crow, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II – it remains the land of opportunity, founded on ideals of freedom and justice and uniquely welcoming to the hard work of immigrants. For Baldwin, Mills, and Coates, the United States might be more properly understood as a racial polity, the history of which begins with discriminatory racial laws in colonial governments, runs through slavery, segregation, and so on, and continues in the multiple deaths of African Americans at the hands of the police.

Mills is quite clear that only a characterization of the latter sort tracks the truth. In calling attention to “white ignorance,” he contrasts this “group-based cognitive handicap” to knowledge, and he insists that the point of this contrast “would be lost if all claims to truth were equally spurious, or just a matter of competing discourses.”⁶ Here, Mills adheres to what he calls a “realist, intellectual framework, one in which truth, falsity, facts, reality, and so forth are not enclosed with ironic scare quotes.”⁷ Yet in this essay, I want to argue that ignorance and “truth without scare quotes” are not our only options. While we should rethink an exceptionalist self-understanding of the United States that dogmatically resists modification, I want to argue for a pluralist interpretive framework that departs from Mills’s realism as well. I also want to argue that fluency with such pluralism signals the on-going importance of an education not only in history but in the humanities and interpretive disciplines in general. To make this argument, I turn to some of the insights of philosophical hermeneutics. I begin, however, by examining the ignorance to which Baldwin, Mills and Coates point.

WHITE IGNORANCE

In declaring that white Americans neither know nor want to know that “they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives,” Baldwin raises a complex charge.⁸ He does not accuse white Americans of simply being unaware of what we have done and are doing. A lack of awareness alone could presumably be corrected through instruction, by looking into our past and present actions. Nor does Baldwin maintain that white Americans deny what we have done and are doing. If we disputed the claim that we have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives, we could present evidence to the contrary. Rather, Baldwin suggests that white Americans are unaware of our past and present actions and refuse to acknowledge this unawareness. We neither own nor disown our actions. Instead, we are resolved, whether implicitly or explicitly, not to attend to those actions and to behave as if the knowledge of those actions is not worth having.

How can knowledge of a history of damaging the lives of African Americans and other people of color be not worth having? The resolve against both knowing and wanting to know arguably runs along two interrelated lines. First, it assumes that the racial injustices of which we have and want no knowledge are a problem of the past. It may be that Europeans slaughtered native people in the 18th and 19th century and oppressed, murdered, and subjugated African Americans during the years of slavery and Jim Crow. Nevertheless, with the Civil Rights era and the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the 1960s, that past is over. Reflections on and investigations of historical injustices signal a refusal to let bygones be bygones. In the cases of the worst abuses, such reflections and investigations signal a refusal to acknowledge either the length of time that has passed since the abuses transpired, or the flocks of American citizens whose ancestors had not yet arrived. Hence, Jennifer Rubin of the *Washington Post* criticizes all mention of race by elected officials. We must, she says, “get out of this racial archeology and . . . not be held prisoners forever in a past that most Americans have never personally experienced.”⁹

A second assumption underlying the idea that knowledge of a racially unjust past is not worth having is closely tied to this first. Here the assumption

is that refusing to leave the past in the past threatens to undermine a fragile racial peace between whites and people of color, particularly African Americans. Thus, when the Equal Justice Initiative recently documented over four thousand lynchings of African Americans in the South between 1877 and 1950, a number far larger than previously acknowledged, some objected to the plan to memorialize the victims because, in their view, it would “pick off the scab” from old wounds.¹⁰ Likewise, while Coates and others think that a discussion of reparations for slavery and more recent injustices against African Americans would contribute to much-needed historical reckoning, their critics argue that any such discussion would not only not compensate for racial injuries but also cause white resentment and “re-open the very wounds it is intended to heal.”¹¹

Such metaphors of scabs and healing are worth examining in some depth, for they have a long history in the United States when it comes to race.¹² Objections to marking sites of lynchings or discussing reparations echo the narrative of reconciliation that arose in the wake of the American Civil War. As David W. Blight’s 2002 book, *Race and Reunion*, makes clear, this narrative originated in an attempt to reunite the Northern and Southern states by insisting on the sacrifices and honorable commitments of both sides of the conflict. Frederick Douglass and others tried to promote an alternative understanding of the war by drawing on President Lincoln’s reference to a “new birth of freedom” in his Gettysburg Address. Douglass argued that, although the war may have started as a war to save the Union, after that address it became an “abolition war” to end slavery. Moreover, he maintained, the war would not end “until the black men of the South, and the black men of the North shall have been admitted, fully and completely into the body politic of America.”¹³ In contrast, the “reconciliationist” account sought to re-bind North and South together by omitting all talk of slavery or emancipation and emphasizing both the moral equivalence of the causes for which each side fought, and the equal measure of courage, death, and suffering that each endured. “My enemy is dead,” Walt Whitman wrote:

I look where he lies white-face and still in the coffin – I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.¹⁴

Blight notes the unintended irony here. In the kinship between “all the ‘white-faced’ dead brothers rested that ‘beautiful’ idea of *reconciliation*, as well as the ultimate betrayal of the dark-faced folk whom the dead had shared in liberating.”¹⁵ The reconciliationist view sat increasingly well with a country worn out by war, panicked by the economic downturn in 1873, upset by the corruption of the Grant administration, and certain that with the passage of the Civil War amendments, black progress had gone quite far enough. As the United States readied for the hundredth anniversary of its founding, Douglass worried that the country would “lift to the sky its million voices in one grand Centennial hosanna of peace and good will to all the white race.”¹⁶ Indeed, by the end of the 19th century, the reconciliationist narrative had joined forces with a white supremacist account under which the Civil War became the Lost Cause, a valiant attempt to preserve the Southern way of life and defend state sovereignty. For its part, Reconstruction became the great mistake, an effort to offer newly freed slaves rights they were unprepared to use appropriately, and Northerners a platform on which its carpetbaggers could exploit the South. As Blight writes: “The Civil War had become the nation’s inheritance of glory, Reconstruction the legacy of folly, and the race problem a matter of efficient schemes of segregation.”¹⁷

Although Blight ends this account of the reconciliationist movement in 1915 with Woodrow Wilson declaring “a righteous peace,” it is easy to see how the victory of what Douglass called Horace Greely’s “hand clasping across the blood chasm business”¹⁸ fed into a narrative about the benevolent and civilizing character of slavery itself, a narrative promulgated most prominently by elite university professors such as Ulrich B. Phillips and lasting at least into the late 1950’s.¹⁹ It is also easy to locate the continuing strength of this narrative in worries such as Rubin’s about racial archeology as well as in worries about efforts to uncover the extent of lynching and other racial crimes. We can therefore extend Blight’s analysis to trace a powerful dimension of white not knowing and not wanting to know. A reconciliationist narrative bolsters a new national unity by removing the intent to preserve slavery from the Confederacy’s Lost Cause, and by removing emancipation from the North’s achievement. Because

reunion requires accommodating North and South, the narrative concentrates on the equal valor and suffering of Northern and Southern troops and extends that moral equivalence to the causes for which they fought: the union and state's rights, respectively. To the extent that the existence of slavery cannot be removed entirely from this picture, it acquires an alternative understanding. Textbooks and commemorations celebrate a romantic vision of Southern gentility while slavery becomes an almost compassionate institution.

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois could write:

No one reading the history of the United States during 1850-1860 can have the slightest doubt left in his mind that Negro slavery was the cause of the Civil War, and yet during and since we learn that a great nation murdered thousands and destroyed millions on account of abstract doctrines concerning the nature of the Federal Union.²⁰

Arguably, the ideal of reconciliation that requires this account extends from Northern and Southern whites to relations between European and African Americans. Reports on African American lives and experiences are generally admitted into public discussion only as long as they do not threaten what is touted as a post-racial national harmony. Just as during the years after the Civil War, an understanding of that war as a war for emancipation was meant to undermine national unity by extending the rift between North and South, extended consideration of American racial history is currently meant to undermine national unity by deepening the rift between whites and blacks. This knowledge is not worth having, first, because the past is the past and, second, because the knowledge of it would reopen wounds on both sides. In the end, 57% of whites think Americans simply talk too much about race.²¹

A parallel with the historians' dispute in Germany is instructive.²² In the 1980s, conservative German historians such as Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber, and Ernst Nolte tried to advance a revisionist history of the Second World War and Third Reich. Like the American reconciliationists, their intended goal was national unity, and like the American reconciliationists, they attempted

to reach it by trying, if not to erase, nonetheless to downplay the problematic dimensions of the past. Stressing those dimensions, the conservative historians suggested, denied Germans an appropriately positive vision of themselves and their history. Thus, Stürmer complained about what he saw as too heavy a historiographic concentration on the Nazi era, while Hillgruber asked that we look at World War II from the perspective of the soldier on the Eastern Front, stressing this soldier's heroism in attempting to stop the invasion of the Red Army into Prussia and contrasting that heroism to the indifference of the Allies to Prussia's fate. For his part, Nolte claimed that, except for the "technical procedure of gassing," the Nazis were copiers rather than inventors, merely imitating Bolshevik procedures rather than creating them, motivated, moreover, by a legitimate fear of Bolshevism.²³

These and other accounts took place as public history, written for magazines and played out against the circumstance of U.S. President Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery where SS members are interred. The equivalences they suggest – Auschwitz and Dresden, the suffering of Holocaust victims with German soldiers and the SS – echo the equivalences the American reconciliationists asserted between North and South. Indeed, what separates a German revisionist history from its American predecessor is arguably only its failure. In the case of Germany, intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas intervened to protest the revisionists' "identificatory grab at national history,"²⁴ and were able to renew a substantive national discussion of Germany's Nazi past. In the United States, despite the efforts of Douglass and others, the reconciliationist "identificatory grab at national history" succeeded. The same insistence on the need for national unity that was later voiced by conservative German historians led, in the United States, to a severely limited historical account, one designed to re-forge a united America without the memory of the horrors of slavery to re-divide it, and without the aspiration for full civil rights for former slaves. When Reconstruction ended, Southern blacks were left to the mercy of the Ku Klux Klan, while the North overlooked its own racism. And even after the Civil Rights era, white America's interest in the past remains chiefly to downplay it. The consequence is the ignorance of many Americans about significant aspects

of their history.

To be sure, there is something peculiar in the idea that the goal of national unity or reconciliation precludes a serious examination of a problematic past. Truth and reconciliation commissions, as their name implies, regularly pair reconciliation with a decision not to whitewash or bury the past, but rather to exhume and examine it. One of the intentions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, as expressed by the act that authorized it, is “the pursuit of national unity” as well as “the well-being of all South African citizens and peace,” all of which require “reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society.”²⁵ Likewise, in his foreword to the final report of the Commission, Bishop Desmond Tutu not only rejects the idea that examining the violence and injustice of the past is counterproductive but also he does so in the very same terms of wounds and healing that many Americans use to avoid this sort of examination. Contradicting those who insist that we leave the past in the past, he writes, “Amnesia simply will not do” and insists that “the past refuses to lie down quietly.”

However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.²⁶

To be sure, truth and reconciliation commissions are not always unqualified successes. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that research into forgotten or suppressed aspects of America’s racial past deepens national disunity or incites scenarios of revenge to which those worried about excavating it often point. In trying to understand this worry, then, we might add a third undercurrent to white ignorance. In his attempt to understand Germany’s revisionist historians, Habermas points to an urge to dissolve cognitive dissonances. In his view, the work of the psychoanalyst, Edith Jacobson suggests that the developing child needs to learn how to accommodate two opposing experiences of its primary caregiver so as to be able to cultivate a complex image of the same person.

The child needs to learn how to connect its experience of the loving and giving caregiver with its experience of the caregiver who withdraws and is unavailable. The urge simply to replace one experience with the other is easier to satisfy, however, and “all the more understandable the further apart the two extremes become.” In the context of the Third Reich, then, the urge can be to substitute “the positive impressions of one’s own father or brother, which are saturated with experience” for “the disquieting information which is provided by abstract reports about the contexts of these persons’ actions and their entanglements.” Indeed, Habermas continues: “It is in no way those who are morally insensitive who feel forced to liberate that collective fate, in which close relations were involved, from the blemish of extraordinary moral legacies.”²⁷

The length of time covered by the racial history of colonial America and the United States means that close relations are not always involved. Nevertheless, the urge to avoid cognitive dissonance felt by many Americans is arguably as strong as, or stronger than, that to which Habermas points. America’s history of race relations means that were white Americans seriously to examine the past, we would have to face up to a quite different history from the one we were taught at school. Those events and practices that an exceptionalist picture of the United States sees as aberrations (in a history that otherwise progresses steadily in its realization of ideals of justice and equality) will, from the alternative viewpoint, appear as the norm. A resolve to know and want to know the extent of the history of racial injustice would have to reckon with America’s own “extraordinary moral legacies.” Mills offers us a list:

The slow-motion Holocaust of African slavery ... the Middle Passage, and the “seasoning” process ... the casual acceptance as no crime, just the necessary clearing of the territory of pestilential “varmints” and “critters,” of the random killing of stray Indians in America ... and on the slave plantations – whippings, castrations, dismemberments, roastings over slow fires, being smeared with sugar, buried up to the neck, and then left for the insects to devour; the fact that in America the medieval tradition of the auto-da-fe, the public burning,

survived well into the twentieth century, with thousands of spectators sometimes gathering for the festive occasion of the southern barbecue, bringing children, picnic baskets, etc., and subsequently fighting over the remains to see who could get the toes or the knucklebones before adjourning to a celebratory dance in the evening.²⁸

If we add the white mobs who stormed and destroyed entire black communities such as Rosewood, Florida, and the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the thefts of farmland owned by blacks who had been lynched or driven off their property as in Forsyth County, Georgia, government policies that intentionally disfavored African Americans, patterns of redlining and housing covenants that kept many in ghettos through most of the 20th century and were replaced with predatory lending policies in the 21st, drug policies that incarcerated countless numbers of black men and police killings of others, the cognitive dissonance becomes nearly overwhelming. For many, including the critics of the 2014 A.P. History framework, confronting American racial history may engender an epistemological crisis that threatens to shatter their sense of who they are and where they live. Rather than “a dynamic and exemplary nation” pitted with a few flaws, they might find themselves in the country Mills depicts, a deeply racist nation with a few exemplary incidences and people. No wonder, then, that some might seek refuge from cognitive dissonance in an exceptionalist historical memory.

Nevertheless, in the rest of this essay I want to consider whether a choice between this refuge and Mills’s “realist” framework is our only option. In the context of the German historians’ debate, Habermas distinguishes between “the attempt to place a revisionist history at the service of a national-historical refurbishment of a conventional identity” and “the task of understanding based on a distanced analysis that liberates the power of a reflective memory and thus extends the latitude for an autonomous treatment of ambivalent traditions.”²⁹ While white ignorance and contemporary U.S. politics point decidedly toward the former, I want to consider the grounds for the latter. If the view that the past is over, the fear of the consequences of examining it and the urge to avoid

cognitive dissonance constitute powerful impediments to a more adequate understanding of our racial history on the part of white America, how might we surmount them and what might a more adequate understanding involve? In order to consider these questions, I turn to philosophical hermeneutics.

A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

Philosophical hermeneutics conceives of history as a set of interpretive resources. As socialized beings, we participate in a history that we inherit rather than create. Our historical traditions bequeath to us the world within which we must maneuver as well as the practical know-how, the culturally and historically acquired assumptions, the evaluative expectations, and the implicit norms of assessment that allow us to do so. Because these knowledges, assumptions, expectations, and norms are handed down to us, we always already possess our world and its meanings before we come to consider them in a more reflective way. Martin Heidegger therefore focuses on the pre-theoretical knowledge we exhibit in our practical activities, such as opening doors and hammering nails, while Hans-Georg Gadamer attends to our pre-understanding of texts and text-analogues such as events, actions, and practices. In both cases, we pre-possess forms of understanding and orientations – or what Gadamer calls prejudices – that provide us with our capacities for coping with our world and deciphering its contents. The literary critic, Alyssa Rosenberg thinks “our contemporary conversation about Shakespeare would be a lot more interesting if, rather than using the Bard’s name as a synonym for unimpeachable greatness, we could talk about what works of Shakespeare we like best, which do not resonate with us and why.”³⁰ Yet those brought up in particular cultural and literary traditions cannot avoid identifying Shakespeare’s name with “unimpeachable greatness.” Whether they enjoy Shakespeare’s work or not, they approach it *as* Shakespeare’s work, as work, in other words, that already provides them with a standard of excellence. Even when they talk about which works they like and which do not resonate with them, they are talking about works by Shakespeare with all the meanings that name contains.

To be sure, this conception of historical tradition seems ill-positioned to provide an alternative to history as the “refurbishment of a conventional identity.” Rather, philosophical hermeneutics seems to offer us an account of historical transmission wherein the traditions of interpretation in which such conventional identities are inscribed are taken up uncritically, and passed down to new generations to provide on-going orientations for what they can take as true. Gadamer claims explicitly to be rehabilitating both historical tradition and the orientations or prejudices it provides. His philosophical hermeneutics thus makes it unclear how the inheritors of certain cultural and literary traditions could ever come to understand Shakespeare in terms not associated with “unimpeachable greatness.” Similarly, his hermeneutics makes it unclear how white Americans could ever surmount the reconciliationist narrative that the post-Civil War historians and poets established. Instead, Gadamer appears to rehabilitate historical tradition precisely at the cost of a “distanced analysis that liberates the power of a reflective memory.”³¹ Indeed, as some of his critics have argued, philosophical hermeneutics seems essentially conservative. Given the account of understanding it offers, it makes it difficult to see how a conventional identity could ever be sufficiently challenged even to require refurbishment.

At the same time, one of the resources to which Gadamer looks in developing his hermeneutics is experience. Although we inherit cultural and historical orientations and prejudices, we apply and activate them in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, circumstances, moreover, in which we are not alone. We may, for example, have inherited a particular form of culturally specific practical knowledge in knowing how to sidle politely around a crowd in the tight space of a small museum. In a particular application of this know-how, however, just as we attempt to sidle, one member of the crowd steps back into our path and trips us. The anticipation we had that we would move around the crowd to view a painting further down the hall collides with the anticipation that a member of this crowd had that she would step back into an empty space. Both of us therefore find ourselves on the ground. Similarly, what we enact as a simple defenestration combines with the actions of others and with additional events and perceptions to start the Thirty Years War, a war we can know as

the Thirty Years War only after it has ended. In both cases, further experience undermines the prejudices or expectations with which we began. What we anticipated as a sidling turns out to be a fall, and what we initially took as the action of pushing a few people out of a window turns out to be the beginning of a very long war. That we inherit presumptions and expectations thus does not ensure that our understanding will remain the same. In coping with our world we necessarily project or anticipate the meanings of actions, texts, and the like, but these projections and anticipations are always subject to failure and revision.

For Gadamer, this sort of failure signals the less noticed, perhaps, of two aspects of experience. One aspect is confirmatory. When I sidle around a crowd successfully, I ratify my experience of the practice's efficacy in that I am now free to view a painting that the presence of the crowd previously obstructed. Likewise, I have experience with pushing people out of windows and I am familiar with their typical results. From a pattern of similar experiences, I derive a general finding – hence the importance of experiments in the natural sciences where “the dignity of experience depends upon its being in principle repeatable.”³² A second aspect of experience has the opposite valence, however. In this case, experiences are essentially negative: events do not go as planned and our expectations are upset. According to this sense of experience, we “have” experiences, suffer or go through them. Their consequence, Gadamer insists, is a revision in our understanding. First, what we assumed to be the case in terms of the meaning of a specific event or effect of acting turns out to be mistaken. Second, in realizing that our assumptions were mistaken we come to understand or clarify them as assumptions. We may not have been explicitly self-aware that we intended to sidle around a crowd with the aim of getting a closer look at a particular painting. Rather, only when we are on the ground does it become clear to us what we had expected to do and what our assumptions were. Moreover, what become clear are the assumptions and expectations not only about the particular event but about the network of understandings and practices – of sidling, the behavior of crowds, etc. – in which this event is implicated.

While Gadamer refers here to Hegel's dialectic, which Gadamer thinks articulates the “reversal of consciousness” to which experience gives rise, he

departs from Hegel in denying that this dialectic ends.³³ For Hegel, experiences serve a progression of ever more satisfactory forms of knowledge that lead to an absolute knowledge in which subject and object are finally adequate to one another. For Gadamer, because history does not end, our continuing experiences allow for continuously new understandings. As Donatella Di Cesare points out, Gadamer introduces a “rift into total dialectical mediation. Finitude prevents totalization, blocks perfection, forbids the completion of becoming, and denies both the absolute and absolutism.”³⁴ Experience also leads to an openness to what Axel Honneth calls the “surprise value” of new experiences.³⁵ The dialectic of experience,” Gadamer writes, “has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.”³⁶

For philosophical hermeneutics, then, the circumstance that we inherit rather than create history leads not to stasis in which we can only repeat what our ancestors believed, but rather to a recognition that all our understanding is revisable. Experiences provoke interpretive reassessments; they clarify for us what our previous assumptions were and ask us to acknowledge the limits of what we once took to be the case. Because history continues, we can never take final hold of all the meanings a text, practice, action, or the like can have. Rather, we experience them in light of new or other texts, practices, and actions, in terms of which they acquire new meanings and nudge us to rethink what we thought we knew. Rubin’s assumption that the past is the past thus finds no foothold in historical experience. As it turns out, we can never know the past in its entirety because its meaning continues to change; moreover, it does so in relation to a future we cannot foresee and that reminds us, instead, of our finitude and fallibility.

We can find some confirmation for Gadamer’s point here in the current attention in the United States to the meaning of Confederate symbols. Following the success of the reconciliationist narrative, for many Americans the Confederate flag, statues of Confederate generals, and memorials to the Confederate dead became innocuous reflections of a way of life, one that some may have identified with racist attitudes but that others maintained were merely tributes

to a group's Southern heritage. Arguably, if Confederate symbols ever were the latter independent of the former, then following the massacre of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015, they no longer are. South Carolina therefore removed the Confederate flag from the state capital in Columbus, and other states and institutions began de-Confederatizing as well. For example, the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. removed images of the Confederate flag from two of its stained glass windows, and the University of Louisville will remove a Confederate monument near its campus. Some confirmation of Gadamer's point might also be found in the way the #BlackLivesMatter movement has changed understandings of the meanings of institutional names and emblems that may have once seemed too timeworn to provoke comment. Harvard Law School dropped its official seal, which had derived from the family crest of an 18th-century slave owner; students at Yale University asked that the university rename Calhoun College, named after John C. Calhoun, a defender of slavery, and Princeton University students asked that Woodrow Wilson's name be removed from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs because of his segregationist beliefs and actions.

Nevertheless, if these and other events are beginning to revise the meanings Confederate symbols and institutional names possess, de-Confederatization in the United States is not only very late but still incomplete. The United States remains replete with statues of Confederate generals as well as countless Confederate flags and memorials, including one dedicated in Arizona as recently as 2010. As yet, the National Cathedral has no plans to remove windows honoring Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and Yale and Princeton have thus far decided against renaming their colleges and schools. A plan in New Orleans to remove Confederate monuments in 2015 was met with death threats and the intentional torching of a potential contractor's car. After the 2016 election, the Confederate flag became a frequent addition to victory parades.³⁷ Despite our experiences, then, what Hegel calls a reversal of consciousness seems partial at best.

Potentially more devastating, however, for any attempt to look to philosophical hermeneutics for an adequate historical account, is the suggestion

philosophical hermeneutics seems to make that understanding comes only from experience, and that it therefore depends upon the course of events. Are we simply to wait, then, until some event or series of events provokes us to understand our history differently? Worse, are we to welcome events such as the murder of African Americans at church because they begin to change our understandings of meaning—in this case, the meaning of Confederate symbols? And how can we be certain about the direction in which they might change our understandings? If, as Gadamer contends, understanding is something that happens through experience rather than something we achieve, what value does philosophical hermeneutics really have as a framework for historical study? If understanding depends on experience, and we cannot predict or control our experiences, how can we be sanguine about what we might come to understand? Is this outcome precisely that which Mills fears in criticizing the scare quotes around truth?

I think we can draw a different conclusion from Gadamer’s analysis. Although philosophical hermeneutics may be overly passive in awaiting the effects of experience, it also stresses the importance of openness and thus offers another option for rethinking historical tradition. While Mills contrasts ignorance to knowledge, philosophical hermeneutics contrasts ignorance to dogmatism, and it equates knowledge with the recognition that all our understanding is partial. It may be that philosophical hermeneutics places too much emphasis on the extent to which this recognition issues from the way experience confounds our assumptions and expectations, but among our most important experiences for Gadamer are our experiences of others. If Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate historical tradition, it is also clear not only that there are countless historical traditions, but also that traditions are internally composite. We grow up in a world in which the people we encounter grow up with different practices and conventions, belong to different faiths, possess different conceptions of the good, and adhere to different political orientations. Moreover, these practices, conventions, faiths, conceptions of the good, and political orientations contain multiple strands: for example: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and so on, liberalism, conservatism, and the like. The openness to and possibility of change in our

historical understanding is not a matter only of the linear experience of monolithic traditions. Rather, it is, or can be, the result of experiences of and with others, fostered in transnational, heterogeneous, and intercultural communities and collectivities. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer's discussion of experience therefore leads directly into a discussion of dialogue. In talking to and with others, we can experience the challenges their views and outlooks present to our own, and together with them we can rethink what we thought we knew.

Importantly, I think, for the attitude of openness, we need not rely only on the diversity of the spaces in which we happen to live, any more than we need rely only on the experiences we happen to have. Rather, openness is an attitude fostered by an education in the humanities. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* actually begins with this point. Looking to the 19th century, and especially Hegel's concept of *Bildung* or cultivation, Gadamer seeks to show the roots of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in the humanist tradition. Whereas Kant uses the concept of *Bildung* in connection with the duty to cultivate one's talents, Hegel conceives of it in terms of cultivating oneself. Here, like the negative aspect of experience, the concept reflects a process more than a result. In *Bildung* one does not develop only one's talents or concentrate solely on the aim of being able to exercise them. Rather one develops oneself and does so through openness to what is alien or other. Practical *Bildung* involves developing oneself by working on an object separate from oneself while theoretical *Bildung* involves developing oneself by examining new ideas, alternative understandings, and unfamiliar conceptions. Gadamer writes that theoretical *Bildung* "leads beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to affirm what is different from oneself."³⁸ In so doing, one moves from the particularity of one's own situation or point of view to a universal perspective, which Gadamer describes as "the viewpoints of possible others."³⁹ Again, as with experience, Hegel, according to Gadamer, thinks *Bildung* ends in absolute knowledge in which no further cultivation is necessary. Gadamer, in contrast, thinks that even if we hold on to the idea of perfect *Bildung*, because of the finitude of our existence and the partiality of our understanding, it refers to a mature rather than a final state, a state in which we have developed an openness, sensitivity, and tact that allow

us to continue to learn.

Given the role Gadamer gives to historical tradition, *Bildung* is especially important for his analysis. If we are socialized beings who participate in traditions that are handed down to us and that provide us with our initial facility with our world in the form of prejudices and orientations we inherit, then the degree we can go beyond our inheritance is the degree to which we can learn, and learn not just from the course of our own experience but from discussions with others who hold backgrounds, viewpoints and perspectives different from our own. At the same time, for both Hegel and Gadamer, the most significant aspect of *Bildung* involves the process of what we might call appropriation and assimilation. In practical *Bildung*, one alienates oneself in the object on which one works, and reaps the benefits of self-development that alienation involves in returning to oneself a more *gebildetete* person. Likewise, in theoretical *Bildung* one journeys out into the ideas and views of others and then returns to a more developed version of oneself in integrating and taking them on board. Gadamer consequently claims that “What constitutes the essence of *Bildung* is clearly not alienation as such, but the return to oneself.”⁴⁰

Yet I want to argue that, to the extent that *Bildung* involves a humanistic education, what is most important is not appropriation and assimilation but the cultivation of the capacity to accommodate cognitive dissonance, the insight Habermas attributes to Edith Jacobson. Put otherwise, what the humanities teach is an openness developed from understanding texts, histories, events, and actions in multiple, divergent ways. What a humanistic education allows us to see is not only that there are ways other than the ones we have inherited of viewing and coping with the natural or human world, but also that grasping these ways and learning to understand from more than one perspective are important aspects of maturity.

This capacity for cognitive dissonance is perhaps most clearly cultivated in literary interpretation. In previous work, I have pointed to our capacity to appreciate differing interpretations of Jane Austen’s work. Take Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*, whom Lionel Trilling sees as a symbol of Christian heroism,⁴¹ Alasdair MacIntyre as a model of the virtue of constancy in an unburnished

state,⁴² Nina Auerbach as “a silent censorious pall,”⁴³ and Kingsley Amis as proof that Austen’s very “judgment and . . . moral sense were corrupted.”⁴⁴ We need not decide between these interpretations. Rather, the extent to which one is compelling has no effect on the capacity of another to be equally compelling. We can understand Ophelia’s madness in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in terms of feminine stereotypes, but we can also draw on feminist criticism to see it as the expression of her real self once freed of patriarchal authority. Likewise, we can appreciate the different interpretations Mills and David Bosworth offer of Herman Melville’s novella, *Benito Cereno*. Mills understands the book in terms of his account of white ignorance. Because the white Amasa Delano, captain of the American merchant ship “Bachelor’s Delight,” cannot conceive of Africans as effective agents, he cannot see that they have taken over the ship that was transporting them as slaves from Buenos Aires to Lima. Bosworth, however, interprets the novella as a critique of Delano’s sunny, clueless geniality, “whose wholesale rejection of the grimmer side of human nature prevents him from recognizing a slave mutiny in progress.”⁴⁵

In each of these cases, the practice of literary interpretation prompts us to entertain different understandings of the same text or incident or character in a text. To the extent that each interpretation can point to textual evidence for its understanding, none can claim superiority to the others. Rather, each may emphasize different aspects of the texts at issue and weave the various parts of the texts together in different ways. Each may understand the texts in terms of different concerns, worries, and interests, and in terms of different relations to different ideas and references. The practice of literary interpretation asks for evidence and justification for understandings that are to be taken seriously. Yet it assumes that because different readers can take up an identical text under different circumstances and in relation to different touchstones, they can stress different parts of it, understand their significance differently, and relate them to the remaining parts of the text differently as well. This interpretive pluralism enriches our understanding. To return to *Mansfield Park*, compare Edward Said’s understanding of the novel in terms of postcolonial theory to an interpretation in terms of queer theory. Said uses the silence that attends Fanny’s questions

about the business her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, has in Antigua to highlight the entanglement of the novel with issues of slavery and colonialism;⁴⁶ George Haggerty looks to Fanny’s own silence and timidity to see the novel as an exploration and defense of Fanny’s “transgressive,” quasi-incestuous love for her cousin, Edmund.⁴⁷ Just as we learn to understand the loving and giving caregiver as the same person who withdraws and is unavailable, we learn to understand the text that is complicit with the slave trade as the same text that is transgressive.

One of the virtues of the capacity to see the same text in different ways is the insight it gives us into its richness. Where we are able to see the different meanings a particular text or aspect of a text possesses, we can also grasp its depth and breadth, both of which are invisible to us as long as we hold only to one, or our own, understanding of it. Put otherwise, when we take up the wealth of possible ways a text can be understood, and understand the multiplicity of concerns and interests to which it speaks, we also see its worth. Moreover, attentiveness to interpretive differences enhances self-knowledge. Certainly, where we can understand a text in different yet equally plausible ways, we understand the partiality of any one understanding, as Gadamer suggests. Yet acknowledging interpretive differences also allows us to situate our own understandings in the interpretive space of other understandings. We can compare what we found significant and what spoke to us to what others find significant and what speaks to them. We can thereby both identify what is or was important to us and examine why and in what way it is. To this extent, the capacity to understand differently encourages and lends itself to self-reflection.

If the practice of literary interpretation can stand in for an interpretive pluralism characteristic of a humanistic education in general, then this education remains of manifest importance. It helps to develop the capacity for cognitive dissonance that fosters an awareness of depth and breadth and that enhances self-knowledge. On this analysis, a history of the United States that narrows its meaning to either exceptionalism or racism represents a dogmatic failure. An education in the humanities and interpretive disciplines prepares us to hold at least two trajectories in mind: one that moves from Native American genocide and African slavery through the continued subjugation of people of color to

police brutality, voter suppression laws, and so on, and another that moves from the Declaration of Independence through the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights era to marriage equality. As it turns out, the crisis of the humanities is not simply an academic one. Rather, unless we can continue to nurture the cognitive dissonance interpretive disciplines teach, we will restrict the possibilities of the country we can understand ourselves to be. And in restricting the possibilities of the country we can understand ourselves to be, we encourage either self-satisfaction or despair, neither of which provides orientations for the more mature and self-reflective country we could become.

1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Vintage, 1991[1962]), 5.

2 Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York, 2007), 15.

3 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/31/college-board-bows-to-critics-revises-ap-u-s-history-course> (accessed August 19, 2016)

5 Open Letter: Historians on the College Board's New AP U.S. History Standards: https://www.nas.org/articles/open_letter_american_historians

6 Mills, "White Ignorance," 15.

7 Mills, "White Ignorance," 15.

8 See also Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," *Races and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York, 2007).

9 <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/7/23/1226005/-Washington-Post-s-Rubin-declares-racism-solved-says-Obama-dishonest-for-his-racial-archeology>

10 <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21644192-small-towns-find-it-hard-remember-victims-racial-violence-marking-murder>.

- 11 “20/20: Americans Debate Reparations for Slavery,” <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=124115&page=2>
- 12 David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 13 Ibid., 16.
- 14 Cited in *ibid.*, 23.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid, 132.
- 17 Ibid., 387.
- 18 Ibid., 127.
- 19 Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by The Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton And Company, 1918).
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- 22 See also Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 23 Ernst Nolte, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 6, 1986; cited in Jürgen Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages (Apologetic Tendencies),” trans. Jeremy Leaman, *New German Critique*, no. 44, *Special Issue on the Historikerstreit* (Spring -Summer, 1988): 25-39, 35.
- 24 Habermas, “A Kind of Settlement of Damages,” 27.
- 25 “Truth or Reconciliation Mechanism: Interim Constitution Accord,” <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/provision/truth-or-reconciliation-mechanism-interim-constitution-accord> (accessed 7/11/18).
- 26 <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf>, 7.
- 27 Jürgen Habermas, “Concerning the Public Use of History,” trans. Jeremy Leaman, *New German Critique*, no. 44, *Special Issue on the Historikerstreit* (Spring -Summer, 1988): 40-50, 46.
- 28 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 100.

- 29 Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages," 37.
- 30 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/07/28/ira-glass-and-what-we-get-wrong-when-we-talk-about-shakespeare> (accessed 2/12/2016).
- 31 Habermas, "A Kind of Settlement of Damages," 37.
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- 33 Ibid., 354.
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- 36 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.
- 37 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/confederate-flag-trump.html>.
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- 39 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 17.
- 40 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 14.
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- 44 Kingsley Amis, "What Became of Jane Austen?," *The Spectator* 199 (1957): 439-440, 440.
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