

The Eros of Wisdom, Bildung, and Philosophical Counseling

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Philosophical Practice—A Question of Bildung?”

His [a thinker’s] most serious interests have their abode somewhere in the noblest region of the field of his activity. (PLATO¹)

The question we confront, the identity of philosophical counseling and whether and to what extent it is a matter of Bildung, must begin with the question of philosophy. In Part I of this paper we will see that true to its name, philosophy is the eros or passion for wisdom that gives rise to radical inquiry, inquiry that does not restrict itself in questioning our deepest beliefs and assumptions.² Philosophy is an activity of the heart that compels the highest intellectual honesty and skillful thinking, come what may. This is the most risky of all journeys, a journey of continual self-overcoming that is most rewarding in terms of the integrity and autonomy it bestows. Parts II and III will address a) the issue of Bildung (self-formation) and its relation to the Eros of wisdom, b) how the Eros of wisdom and Bildung are at the heart of philosophical counseling, and c) how philosophical hermeneutics, in particular, provides core insights necessary for the Bildungs-process of awakening to oneself and for confronting the arrogance of finitude.

I. The Eros of Wisdom

For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore Love is also a philosopher or lover of wisdom (PLATO³)

A. Philosophy as Radical Inquiry

Both Plato and Aristotle tell us that the Eros of wisdom begins in wonder, amazement at the ordinary world we take for granted and, according to Plato, is a kind of divine madness because it pulls us to seek a divine rather than a merely human perspective. It appears to be madness to relentlessly question the apparently self-evident truths of common sense.

¹The *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Hamilton & Cairns, *Letters: VII*, pp. 1590-91.

²I use the term *eros* as Plato does in the *Symposium*. The term philosophy and the phrase “eros of wisdom” are literally interchangeable and both mean love of wisdom. The verb, *philein* is often interchangeable with the verb form of eros in Attic Greek. For an extended analysis, see A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989. *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* edited by Alan Soble, University of New Orleans. See also James M. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, Univ. of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2003.

³*Symposium* in *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol. 1, translated by Benjamin Jowett (4th ed., 1953), 204c In the *Symposium* Plato raises the primal question of eros, passion, and its source, that is, what pushes and pulls us to feel, think, and act at all.

But common sense rationality, by taking its own principles for granted, treats meaning and truth as givens which are simply to be accepted in their givenness. This leads common sense to criticize as irrational the whole process of being seized by wonder, being driven to question, being caught up in the eros of inquiry, unless that eros remains confined inside the presuppositions of everyday practice. But when commonsense tries to restrict the scope of wonder by appealing to the given, it is really encouraging us to betray intelligence itself. For how can it be intelligent to impose restrictions on rational inquiry? And how are we to become fully engaged by the spirit of inquiry if we repress without question the drive to wonder which animates and sustains it? To be fully rational requires **surrendering unconditionally to the throe of wonder** instead of clinging to the given; it means allowing oneself to be cast into the **abyss of the unknown** instead of trying to find a way to secure oneself from that vertiginous possibility.⁴

This unconditional surrender to wonder and the radical inquiry and love of wisdom it engenders would appear to drive us to madness because it **undermines the comfortable habits and assumptions of common sense**. This passion for wisdom, however, is not licentious unbridled passion. Sophia is the most demanding mistress who teaches us that passion alone is utterly destructive to the pursuit of wisdom, that it requires the utmost in **patience and careful, sustained skilled thinking**, which includes but does not reduce to logical reasoning.

To philosophize presupposes that one already has beliefs, assumptions, and a world view. What constitutes philosophy is the inquiry into these beliefs and assumptions in the most basic way. Every philosopher has had assumptions, and perhaps some of these assumptions never came under question. To that extent that philosopher did not or could not philosophize about and inquire into those assumptions and presuppositions. **Socrates**, for example, assumed that the elenchus, the process of rationally challenging our beliefs, was worthwhile and could lead us to **recognize our own ignorance**. He had **faith in reason**, that it could improve us if used well. Philosophy cannot operate without assumptions and a faith that the process is worth attempting, but to the extent that a philosopher is vigilant and thorough, even these **enabling assumptions** come under scrutiny. That is what eventually happened when **Kant** questioned the **very limits of reason** and **Nietzsche** radicalized this and took it much further than Kant questioning the **limits of interpretation**.⁵ In the twentieth century, the development of philosophical hermeneutics, particularly in the works of Gadamer, has continued this inquiry into the enabling conditions and limits of meaning and thought.

⁴Jerome Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder*. SUNY Press, 1992. (pp. 4-5)

⁵Kant had his own assumptions about Euclidean geometry and Newtonian science, among others, that were never thoroughly examined. Nietzsche was far more radical in his inquiry than anyone before him. But as a finite human being he could not escape his enabling limits either. But he was far more aware of this than anyone before him.

Radical inquiry operates at the **boundary between the known and the unknown**. It presupposes that one already has a known world and sense of identity, a sense of being at home in the world that can be overturned. No human can live without a sense of the ordinary, a sense of being connected in some way or other. The possibility of having one's world overturned, whether by the practice of philosophy or the vicissitudes of life, is a manifestation of our basic condition as vulnerable, interpreting, meaning-making beings.⁶

For a philosopher or lover of wisdom, this **overturning** is not merely a shift of understanding or transformation within a world of meaning and is not turning from one world of meaningfulness to another, as in a religious conversion, a scientific paradigm shift, or the experience of falling in love. To be a **lover of wisdom**, to inquire radically, **is to be caught up in this turn itself**. It is to be in a perpetual state of self-questioning and self-overcoming. Any **theory** is an attempt to form and explain a world; any belief is a kind of holding on to a world. These are not what are essential to philosophy, though much of philosophy has been the pursuit of theoretical understanding. It is commitment, come what may, to radical inquiry and *this turning itself* that distinguishes the love of wisdom.

Though we habitually refer to the **writings** of such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant as philosophy, strictly speaking they are not philosophy. They are **by-products** of philosophy. If we turn to these writings in a way that is appropriate to philosophy, we do not read them to find answers to philosophical questions, but to be drawn into the dialectic of philosophical inquiry. These writings are the by-product and trace of the love or passion for wisdom. It is this eros, this yearning and distension of the soul, as **Augustine** calls it, which, when it is caught in "the throe of wonder," draws us into radical inquiry.⁷ If philosophy were identified just with the works produced by philosophers and if those works were to completely disappear, then it would follow that philosophy would completely disappear, which is absurd. People would still be capable of passion that leads to radical inquiry, that is, philosophy. Unlike Heidegger and Rorty who identify philosophy as a particular conversation characterized by the unwarranted pursuit of certainty and onto-theology, **philosophy is an impetus** to language in

⁶The most profound manifestations of this basic vulnerability that make conscious, meaningful awareness possible are the primordial experiences of wonder, awe, horror, and anguish, all of which are experiences of the opening or loss of meaning. Miller provides an excellent phenomenology of these primordial experiences and their relation to philosophy as radical questioning. See especially Chapters 1-4 of Miller.

⁷According to Plato: Philosophy engenders an awakening realized after long preparation "suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark," a realization that "is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining." (*The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Hamilton & Cairns, **Letters: VII** p. 1589.)

pursuit of wisdom through radical inquiry whose identity is not restricted to and does not wholly depend upon the extant works produced by that inquiry, past, present, or future. Yes, it is a conversation, but it is identified by its impetus more than its products.

There have been **two complimentary approaches to philosophy** in the lineage from Socrates: one has been a **theoretical** pursuit for its own sake and the other has been a means to **living a better human life**.⁸ For Socrates, philosophy aimed primarily at virtue, **care of the self**. Philosophy is a process of radical inquiry that is not merely intellectual but inquiry driven by matters of the heart, a desire to understand and improve oneself that can transform who one is. It is a kind of undoing in which we **risk** ourselves, our meaningfulness in the service of self-understanding and transformation. Philosophical counseling is squarely in this tradition of philosophy.

Philosophy is a **confrontation with the mystery of being**, that there is anything at all, which is the **mystery of intelligibility**. That there is an intelligible world is the mystery that presents itself at every moment. This mystery is always there, only we do not notice it in the flow of the ordinary. When the ordinary becomes strange and wondrous, philosophy can begin. In philosophy, the known presents a puzzle, a challenge; it immediately opens us to the question of why things are as they are or appear to be or why they ought to be one way rather than another. Philosophy as radical questioning is the ultimate risk of our meaning and a confrontation with our deep vulnerability.

There are **no presuppositionless starting points** for philosophy, nor can philosophy arrive at any. Thinking and meaning are **always already underway**. To be able to think and have meaningful experience at all **presupposes prejudices that both enable and inhibit** any course of thought. The best we can do is become aware of our horizons of meaning and more fundamentally, what it is to have horizons, to always be in a condition of finitude that allows us to inquire at all. The philosophical counselor, whether consciously and explicitly or not, is addressing this most basic condition of human finitude and vulnerability. The most basic and inescapable context for inquiry into this condition must begin with the question of meaning, interpretation, and language.

⁸ See, for example, Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1998. For a lengthy critical review of this book see Dean Pickard, in *New Nietzsche Studies*, Spring, 2000, pp. 137-144. The review is favorable toward Nehamas's account of Socratic irony, but exposes serious flaws in his account of Nietzsche that were also present in his previous *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*..

B. Radical Inquiry and the Linguistic Turn

The question of philosophy, the question of radical questioning itself, can only be adequately addressed in the context of the question “Who is it that questions?” What is the condition of the questioner in particular and what, if anything, is common to all who question, such that this commonality can serve as a basis for understanding the general phenomenon of the eros of wisdom and radical questioning?⁹ This commonality is that we are beings to whom things matter who live in our meanings and our felt sense of being here. This felt sense of being-in-the-world is always our starting point. Recent philosophy has become increasingly sensitive to this phenomenological starting point and has recognized that our being-in-the-world is fundamentally linguistic and interpretive. Though early philosophers were aware of the central importance of language in what we think and say about anything,¹⁰ in the past two centuries the question of language, meaning, and interpretation has come increasingly to the center of philosophy.¹¹ Questions of truth, knowledge, reality, and ethics are now posed in the context of the question of meaning, language, and interpretation. When Wittgenstein says “The limits of my language are the limits of my world,” or Quine tells us that “We can only talk about what we say there is,” they are recognizing what Gadamer has developed further in his notion of linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*), that all meaningfulness arises in the context of language use. Meaningful experience is never utterly captured in language and we often think about and experience things without words. But meaningful experience never occurs outside the context of linguisticity, only occurs for language users.

In *Politics*, Aristotle defines humans not as the rational animal but as the animal with logos, the word, i.e. language, by which we can abstract and distance things and be aware of time and what is beneficial.¹² Language is not merely one more phenomenon that occurs in the world and is studied in our science of linguistics. Gadamer says, “What language is, is the most hidden of anything that humans can contemplate.”¹³ Our experience of speaking is our way of grasping

⁹ Gadamer, refining Aristotle’s definition of humans as the animal with speech, calls humans the animal who questions.

¹⁰ For example, Plato’s *Cratylus* and Aristotle in *On Interpretation*

¹¹ It is especially with Nietzsche that the question of interpretation comes more fully into view. Nietzsche was a philologist and so was highly trained in matters of language and interpretation.

¹² See Gadamer’s remarks regarding this in “Boundaries of Language” *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed., Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000, p. 10.

¹³ Quoted by Istvan Feher in “On the Hermeneutic Understanding of Language: Word, Conversation, and Subject Matter,” in *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed., Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000, pp. 60-61).

the phenomenon of language itself, and hence deceives us into thinking that in knowing its phenomenological aspects we can understand it. Language is not an object of thought that one can hold at a distance and observe. Language cannot be reduced to phonemes, graphemes, or any given content and certainly cannot be explained by any theoretical deep structure. Language is the **very condition of the possibility** of any understanding and meaningfulness at all in philosophy, science, religion, or common sense understandings of the world.¹⁴

Without language there is a kind of consciousness that is exhibited in animal behavior, but not meaningfulness or “worlding,” as Heidegger calls it.¹⁵ The remarkable example of Helen Keller (who was both blind and deaf from infancy) bears this out. As an educated adult reflecting on the time before she was brought into language at about age seven or eight through a method of touch by her teacher, Anne Sullivan, she says:

Before my teacher came to me, **I did not know that I am.** I lived in a world that was no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew nothing, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. I was carried along to objects and acts by a certain blind natural impetus. ...My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith...I was not conscious of any change or process going on in me...When I learned the meaning of “I” and “me” and found that I was something, I began to think. **Then consciousness first existed for me...** It was the awakening of my soul that first rendered my senses their value, their cognizance of objects, names, qualities, and properties. Thought made me conscious of love, joy, and all the emotions. I was eager to know, then to understand, afterward to reflect on what I knew and understood, and the blind impetus, which had before driven me hither and thither at the dictates of my sensations, vanished forever. (*The World I Live In*, 1908.)

It is the development of self-awareness through language and concept use that opens up meaningfulness. It is the context in which abstract expectations, value judgments, and all aspects of personhood and interpersonal relations arise. **Human beings are most fundamentally interpretive beings who live in their meanings.**

¹⁴ See Günter Figal, “The Doing of the Thing Itself,” in Robert Dostal, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002, p 105-106) See also Istvan Feher, “On the Hermeneutic Understanding of Language: Word, Conversation, and Subject Matter,” in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed., Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000, pp. 60-61)

¹⁵ Humans alone have the freedom to distance themselves from the constraints of nature. The fundamental form of such distancing, according to Gadamer, is questioning. A question implies a direction of meaning. (See Lawrence Schmidt, “Language in a Hermeneutic Ontology,” and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Boundaries of Language”(1985) and “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language”(1992), in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000).

In the next section we will briefly look at the further development of this insight about language and meaning in philosophical hermeneutics. The rest of the paper will be an examination of this fundamental insight and its relation to Bildung and philosophical counseling.

C. Philosophical Hermeneutics

Philosophical hermeneutics is the cutting edge of the postmodern linguistic turn, what might be called the “hermeneutical turn,” and is most radical in its inquiry. What distinguishes recent philosophical understanding of the world since Nietzsche is the increasing awareness of its **reflexivity**, that is, it is an interpretive process that reflexively recognizes itself to be interpretive. Philosophical hermeneutics is at the forefront of this recognition and is a rigorous attempt to **understand understanding**. “All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language...”¹⁶ All meaning and understanding always moves in what Gadamer, following Heidegger, called the **hermeneutical circle**.¹⁷ The particular facts and events of our world are interpretable because of a kind of unconscious or partly conscious sense of its whole meaning. That whole meaning constantly changes due to the malleability of the meaning of its particulars, which in turn changes our sense of the whole. The **experience of understanding** is not mere knowledge, but an **event** in which one’s horizons of meaningfulness are transformed. Understanding is not something we do. It is something that happens to us.¹⁸ We can put ourselves in a position to allow or promote understanding. But understanding is an event, a happening, not an action. True experience of understanding surprises us, confounds our expectations and opens new horizons to us. It is more like **an awakening**, an experience of beauty, than an intellectual process, though cognitive and intellectual processes are involved.¹⁹

Understanding must approach itself from its own nearness or not at all, that is from **within the hermeneutical circle** and from the standpoint of an historically situated speaker. It was the aim of the Enlightenment to **overcome prejudice** that blinds us to clear thinking and achieve truth through algorithmic methodologies of certainty. Gadamer sees that prejudice not only has this negative feature that was to be overcome, but that prejudice is the inescapable condition and

¹⁶Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (TM) 2nd revised ed., *Continuum*, 2002, pp. 389.

¹⁷This is not a vicious circle, but is productive of meaning, a precondition for any understanding whatsoever. The term hermeneutical circle refers to the circle of meaning of the whole meaning system and its reciprocal relation to any particular element in that system.

¹⁸“The capacity for understanding is a reception, in the sense of pathos, rather than an activity,...Hermeneutics looks to understand what the understanding is, over and above the ease of a purely technical control of it.” Jean Grondin *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2002, p. 18.

¹⁹See Gadamer’s *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Cambridge Univ. press, 1986.

openness for any meaningfulness at all. Prejudices are the horizons of our understanding of anything and constitute our openness into the world of meaning.²⁰ So Gadamer replaces the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice with a fundamental insight about the limits of meaningfulness. Prejudice is not something that can be overcome or avoided, but rather is the inescapable condition of any meaning and understanding at all.²¹ The point is to recognize this and remain both humble yet vigilant in our process of understanding so that it transforms the way we live, transforms who we are.

Just as Aristotle never gives rules for good judgment and action (*phronesis*)²² there are no rules for understanding. Understanding does not arise due to some methodology. Rather, one has some standpoint, some horizon that arises out of life experience and linguisticity that makes it possible to understand the world at all. Any method only operates within linguisticity and cannot stand outside it to investigate it. The having of a horizon or standpoint precedes any rule-like procedures. Such rule-likeness is only read off any standpoint after the fact. That there is an intelligible world of regularity in experience is the starting point for any interpretive methodology including the exactitude of the sciences. This is a central insight in *Truth and Method* that distinguishes philosophical hermeneutics from previous methodological hermeneutics which failed to see this and that was concerned primarily with adequate methods of interpreting meaning.²³ In contrast, philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with meaningfulness itself and has expressed this in the idea of linguisticity (all meaning arises in the context of the limits of language use and interpretation). This does not mean that all thought or feeling occur as language. Rather, all thought and feeling, all meaningfulness arise in the

²⁰ “The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world.” Gadamer goes on to say, “The prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.” (Gadamer, *TM*, pp. 276-77).

²¹ Gadamer’s Philosophical hermeneutics is grounded in a direct phenomenological observation of communication and understanding in human life. We are always explicitly or implicitly in dialogue with our tradition, with another, and with ourselves. The dialogic event of understanding is a “fusion of horizons.” Horizons are limits that both enable and inhibit our understanding of anything. The fusion of horizons is the interpretive interaction with the tradition we inherit, with other people, and with ourselves as we come to understand anything. Gadamer develops his thinking from Hegel’s recognition of the basic condition of historicity. He uses Husserl’s notion of horizon, but develops this beyond its phenomenological perceptual meaning to include cultural and linguistic awareness, and makes use of Heidegger’s radical historicity or facticity. Facticity refers to our situatedness and finitude and our concerned engagement in the world (things matter to us) in which we project beyond the meaning of what is present to us (live in our possibilities).

²² See page 16 and fn40 below on *phronesis*.

²³ Methodological hermeneutics, developed by Dilthey and others from the tradition of biblical hermeneutics of the 16th and 17th centuries, was an attempt to provide a rigorous objective method of investigation appropriate to the human and social sciences. This approach assumes an objectively correct interpretation of a text or any meaning. This is a form of **scientism or objectivism**, the view that reality and truth can be achieved guided by the assumption that the methods of science can provide independently objective truth, rather than seeing science as a powerful interpretive process guided by the value of objectivity.

broader general context of a way of being in the world whose necessary precondition is participation in language. The lived hermeneutic event of understanding is determined by linguisticity which does not reduce to any particular human language but is the basis for all of them. The common root of all language and the universality of the hermeneutic condition is found in the experiential “impulse towards the word” or “verbum interius” in the ontological structure of human being in the world. That ontological structure is linguisticity in which all meaning is made possible. This term “verbum interius” (inner word), is Augustine’s way of referring to that felt sense of yearning that needs to be expressed but surpasses any linguistic expression we can give it. The idea was used and developed further by Heidegger in his analysis of *Dasein*. Gadamer recognized it as the universal source of our basic hermeneutical condition as interpreting beings. The phrase “inner word” does not refer to any “private or psychological inner world existing prior to its verbal expression. Rather, it is that which strives to be externalized in spoken language. “Externalized language is the site of a struggle which must be heard as such. There is no “pre-verbal” world [subjective or objective], only world oriented to language, the world which is always to be put in words, though never entirely successfully. This is the uniquely hermeneutic dimension of language.”²⁴

There is no fixed starting point of meaning. To recognize this, one must *not* do what we habitually do in epistemological and methodological approaches to understanding, which is to isolate propositions and attempt to establish their truth value through inferential processes in order to achieve objectivity. This objectivity is predicated on the false notion that there is a standpoint outside our situatedness from which we can come to know things as they are independently of our situatedness. The history of philosophy has been largely concerned with the truth value of propositions, with the ontological status of such propositions, and the concepts contained in them.²⁵ Propositions were seen as the core of language and the bearers of truth, which, with diligence, can be fully expressed in the proposition. Rather than the metaphysical and logical priority assigned to propositions, Gadamer tells us that “language is realized not in statements but as conversation.”²⁶ Gadamer focuses on what the text or person has to say, rather than on achieving a final and correct interpretation. A successful interpretation lets the truth of

²⁴ (Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Yale Univ. Press, 1994, p. xv)

²⁵ Gadamer says, “It is the classical logic of judgment, the logic founded on the concept of judgment in which Statements are taken out of their context and given truth value.” Hans-Georg Gadamer “Boundaries of Language” in *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed., L. K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000, p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 15-16. According to Jean Grondin, the proposition “is something secondary and derivative.” *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. p. xiv.

the text or person emerge. This truth is not merely propositional but rather indicates an understanding of something, some matter of concern, and a horizon of understanding within which it emerged. In contrast with the belief that propositions correspond to something called reality which can be penetrated with the use of logic in reasoning, including the methods of science, hermeneutics looks to the larger context of rhetoric in living language as the very condition and source of all logic and reasoning. “At the beginning of generic logic stands the advance work of language itself.”²⁷ “The linguisticity of our experience of the world is prior to everything that is known as an entity and is spoken of.”²⁸ Understanding is a product of life, not a logical product of propositions. Logical propositions and the arguments in which they are used only have their life in the context of my whole understanding. They do not stand outside it.²⁹

D. Philosophical Hermeneutics versus the Arrogance of Finitude

The arrogance of finitude is an unavoidable condition. Arrogance is overstepping one’s boundaries, over estimating one’s grasp of things. We are finite beings who operate from our prejudices. These are the limits, habits, and assumptions we rarely examine. They enable us to have a point of view that we usually take as “the way the world is.” We all know we are fallible, but we don’t keep it upper most in mind that even when we are “right” it is always within the hermeneutical limits that make our meaningful world possible. Becoming hermeneutically aware of our linguisticity is a powerful confrontation with our prejudices and our finitude. It is a movement away from the arrogance of finitude. To grasp one’s finitude is to engender humility. Humility is supposed to be at the core of religious teachings. It is supposed to be a recognition of our limits in relation to something “bigger” or “more” than ourselves, more than we can grasp. But ironically religious fervor and dogma are often the most extreme form of arrogance and smugness about someone’s “truth” instead of an embrace of the core insight about our fallibility and finitude.

Philosophical hermeneutics entails the realization of the impossibility of absolute knowledge in the condition of finitude and historicity. *Absolutism* is the idea that there must be some final, certain, unchanging truth, or standard for judging truth. It arises from the desire to

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 2nd Revised Edition, Continuum, 2002, p. 431.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1985-95, Bd. 10, 273) quoted in *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*. ed., Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lexington Books, 2000, p 6.

²⁹ See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 105, for a similar view.

defeat skepticism about our ability to know anything. **Relativism** is a form of skepticism and is the idea that truth is relative to individuals, groups, systems, cultures, nations, or languages, and that contradictory views can be equally true depending on these factors. Relativism is absurd on its face because relativism itself is an attempt to stand outside history and make an absolutist claim that all truth is relative. **Relativism and absolutism are mistakenly seen as contradictory.** One must be true, the other false. But they are actually only contraries that cannot both be true, but they **both can be false** and that is what philosophical hermeneutics has exposed. We do not have to choose between them and can **reject them both as untenable ways of looking at meaning.**

Philosophical hermeneutics does not finally defeat absolutism and relativism through such reflexive argumentation or by presenting an alternative theory of truth. It **dissolves** them in the undeniable awareness and immediacy of finitude and historicity³⁰ Truth is neither relative nor absolute. **What we call truth is the linguistical result of skillful interpretation.** There is no privileged access to truth. The very term is ambiguous. **Literal discourse** aims at literal, conceptual, factual truth. **Poetical and symbolic discourse** aim at a felt sense of what is most significant and important. To fail to distinguish these different uses of language is to invite a conflict between them as in the controversy over creationism and other pseudo debates. Even in the "pure" sciences of mathematics and logic the **idea of certainty and closure is obsolete.**³¹ The universal claim of philosophical hermeneutics is not a propositional claim to the certainty of an ahistorical universal truth, such as Habermas's transcendently necessary conditions of communication.³² Rather, it **reveals a universal human condition or predicament**, namely, that

³⁰The philosophical achievement of hermeneutics is that "it negates relativism and historicism by [reflexively] folding it back on itself showing its own historicity--that is its [relativism's] secret dependence on metaphysics: the dogmatic thesis of historicism that everything is relative can be made meaningful only against the horizon of a nonrelative, absolute, supratemporal, metaphysical truth. Only by supposing absolute truth possible and using it as a criterion could an opinion be judged merely relative...Historicism denies its own historicity. (J. Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 11)

³¹There can be no closure, no formal algorithmic system for accessing something called Truth. Even the philosophy of logic and mathematics in the works of Goedel, Church, and others has ironically demonstrated formally that no formal system can achieve both closure or completeness and logical consistency (see, for example, John Kadvany, "Reflections On The Legacy of Kurt Goedel: Mathematics, Skepticism, Postmodernism," in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XX, No. 3, Spring 1989). For an historical overview of this development by an eminent mathematician, see Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980). The famous logical problem of decidability demonstrates the basic reflexive nature of language and meaning. The very recognition of this feature of human thought depends reflexively on the structure, limits and rules by which our thinking about all this is guided. Reflexivity has no end as we attempt to move outward to any final limit or perspective that will logically entail what has made any perspective possible. What is exciting to logicians is that Church's Thesis on undecidability is taken to be an *apriori* result for all human thought, i.e., it is a truth of human thought not arrived at by empirical evidence. There is a massive literature on undecidability, for example, the "diagonal problem" and other forms of the "halting problem" that reveals this.

³²Habermas dismisses Derrida and other "postmodernists" for committing a "performative contradiction" wherein the preconditions of the act of speaking contradicts what is being claimed by them. However, Habermas's own attempt to develop an ethics grounded in transcendental conditions of speech itself leads to a performative contradiction. Further, his so-called "necessary conditions" are an artifact of the basic condition of reflexivity in the interpretive process. See Dean Pickard : "Nietzsche, Emancipation, & Truth" in *New Nietzsche Studies*,

all understanding occurs within an historically situated shared linguistic horizon, i.e., linguisticity. Hermeneutics cannot and does not attempt to stand outside this condition to make pronouncements. That is the arrogance of finitude. Rather, its great contribution is to reveal this basic condition more fully and clearly than any earlier thinking. It makes no metaphysical or epistemological claims. Rather, it reveals the unavoidable reflexivity of any such attempt to escape finitude and our inescapable hermeneutical condition, i.e., interpretation and the enabling horizons are always implicated in any "truth" any explanation, any claims about "reality." The way to judge claims is not based on whether they are "true" in any final sense or whether they correspond to reality, but whether they are hermeneutically skillful and aware of their interpretative or hermeneutical condition. Even in epistemology, the correspondence theory of truth and reality has been abandoned as hopelessly untenable. Philosophical hermeneutics takes us out of the inadequate and inappropriate ways of thinking that lead to such an impasse to begin with.

Fallibilism is an alternative to conceptions of truth that succumb to the arrogance of finitude. Fallibilism is the idea that truth is the best and most coherent, consistent, and rigorous interpretation that we have at a given time. This approach always attempts to remain aware of our broader interpretive horizons of finitude and uses but does not reduce to logical consistency. This is a genuine alternative to absolutism and relativism.³³ Logic is parasitic on language and is a distillation and a refinement of the ability to recognize regularity in making sense of things. Rather, appeal to regularity, consistency, and anomaly indicates the inescapable linguisticity that is the background or context for any claims, any logical procedures, any awareness at all.

The virtue of philosophical hermeneutics is that it is not another theory or argument about what is right, true or real and is not competing with any such theories. It is not a theory at all. One does not debate it. It is very much like Gotama Buddha's insights about the immediate features of awareness in general, aside from our awareness of this or that particular thing. All one has to do is stop and see. The Buddha did not allow himself to be drawn into metaphysical debates which, as Kant demonstrated and Hume phenomenologically revealed, is an empty exercise. Hermeneutics is not a debate, but points to something in our immediate awareness,

(SUNY), Winter, 1997, pp. 85-109, and "The Problem of Reflexivity in Habermasian Universalism," *Auslegung*, V. 19, #1, Winter, 1993, pp 1-20.

³³Various forms of American pragmatism, Nietzsche's view of truth, Donald Davidson, and Gadamer, to name a few prominent examples share this general approach to truth and eschew both relativism and absolutism.

something that is undeniable about consciousness, if one can disengage from the ordinary long enough to see what is **omni present** in our experience and awareness.

An example of something that is always there but we never see it is the periphery of our visual field. If your attention is not drawn to it you don't see it. This is not a theory or a debate over truth, not something abstract that can only be thought about. It is confirmed in the immediacy of experience through a phenomenological exercise of noticing what is present, yet unnoticed. Similarly, philosophical hermeneutics brings our attention to what is always immediate and present and is a necessary condition of any awareness and meaningfulness at all: linguisticity and finitude. It begins with a phenomenological awareness of the basic features of experience and moves to an awareness of the conditions of meaningfulness.

Among the **benefits** of philosophical hermeneutics is realizing that we live in our meanings and that our horizons of understanding are always the limits within which we are able to interpret what happens. This is not a new idea. Epictetus said that the "The thing that upsets people is not what happens, but what they think it means." We live in our meanings. The very horizons that enable us to be aware at all are also dangerous if we mistake them for truth. There is an actual recalcitrant world. There are the facts of our lives. But these **"facts" only have their meaning within linguisticity**, they are always a) the product of interpretation and b) take on a significance for us beyond their mere status as facts. There is nothing fixed about what they mean or how they matter to us. Rather, the issue is a matter of skill in interpreting and greater hermeneutical awareness of what it is to be an interpreting vulnerable being. From this we will suffer less from the arrogance of finitude, not get so caught in our meanings that become our prisons, our dogmas. If we recognize other people as being in this same basic condition of insecurity, uncertainty, and finitude we can understand what they do in a way that is more compassionate and less damaging.

In the next section we will be concerned with the relation of Bildung to hermeneutical awareness of living in the horizons of our meaningfulness. Bildung is the process of self-formation and self-overcoming in which we constantly expand and transform our horizons of meaningfulness.

II. Bildung

Bildung is an ambiguous term which gets translated from German into English typically as “education.” A “gebildet” person is an educated person. Despite the difficulties of translating this term from German, we can at least distinguish what might be called intellectual, cultural or school Bildung, from philosophical and individual Bildung. Intellectual Bildung is that in which the educated or “gebildet” person is quite learned, has the skills and methods with which to obtain and order information and apply it in various ways. Examples are well-trained professionals such as doctors, attorneys, accountants, etc.. A high example of this intellectual Bildung is the genuine scholar whose life is largely devoted to learning. On the one hand, this form of Bildung has great utility for society in its need for order, efficiency, and a ready reserve of knowledge. On the other, this form of Bildung is often manifest in a kind of instrumentalism and narrow skepticism that has a vast store of information at its disposal with which to criticize whatever comes into view, show its origins, how it is connected to other knowledge, why it does or does not succeed as a candidate for knowledge, and can be put to work supporting the current religious, scientific, political or academic ideology. In stark contrast to this is **philosophical Bildung**. This also requires a vast background but with an entirely different attitude and motive: **authentic self-formation**.

A. Self-Formation

In Nietzsche’s view, the meaningful coherence of my life and my own identity is not something that is shaped intentionally, but is revealed to me in the process of my own Bildung, self-formation, coming forth as a human being. It is fraught with **uncertainty, ambiguity, and "detours."** It is **always underway**, never complete. Who we are is less what we know, what we do, and what happens to us than **what is revealed** about us in this process of self-formation. Nietzsche was very critical of contemporary education and learning. It has no coherence and is usually a continual piling up of knowledge, information, and the skills necessary to manipulate this for practical use. True Bildung is nowhere to be found. Nietzsche says that the task in true Bildung is to "become who you are" and finally embrace all that has led to who you are; all the things you would have gladly avoided and edited from your life. Nietzsche calls this "amor fati" (love of one’s fate) which is an **attitude** toward life, not a perspective, belief or truth by which we try to sustain ourselves against our insecurities. Each of

us is a "spiritual fatum" not just a blank slate that experience writes upon, but rather an emerging identity that moves toward itself via the experiences of life. The particular events of my life are not who I am. Rather, who I am shows itself in how I appropriate the particular events of my life as *my* experience, experience from *my* sense of things. My sense of things does not reduce to any or all of the events of my life. And if those events had been different and had some significantly different impact on my journey to myself, that identity itself, when more fully recognized, would not be wholly different. That "spiritual fatum" or emerging self has no determinate way of working itself out. Rather, there is **indeterminacy or contingency** in this process. But that "spiritual fatum" is what organizes the events of my life into a coherent whole.³⁴ Bildung is the process of the unfolding or the emergence of this "spiritual fatum" or inner identity that is more "true" of us than any of the outer events of our lives.

At the center of **Gadamer's concern to understand understanding** and to engender an awareness of the **universality of the hermeneutic condition** is also the idea of **Bildung**.³⁵ Drawing on Hegel, Gadamer says "Bildung...requires sacrificing particularity for the sake of the universal.... distancing from the immediacy of desire, of personal need and private interest, and the exacting demand of a universal."³⁶ Such movement away from particularity is **movement away from oneself** "keeping oneself **open to what is other**—to other, more universal points of

³⁴ See Anders Lindeth "Is Bildung a Possible Goal for Philosophical Practice?" in this volume. Lindeth nicely distinguishes the *events* of our lives from the *meaning* of our lives, *school* Bildung (a process of adaptation) from true *individual* Bildung. He argues that philosophical counseling cannot aim at or produce Bildung, but rather, true Bildung (the emergence of one's "true life's way," is served by PC."(p.3) "It is not the task of philosophical practice to answer the question of 'Bildung' but rather to raise it and maybe to clarify, demonstrate and strengthen it."(p. 16) He argues that though schooling should strive to be more humane, it cannot address real (individual) Bildung. If pedagogues assume that they can know what is right in terms of individual Bildung for each student, the danger is very great because genuine Bildung is not something that can be pursued via theoretical models of learning and their methods. In fact, such models and methods typically preclude even recognizing true Bildung and ultimately rob us of the highest form of human dignity (what Gadamer and Nietzsche are so focused on). Neither the "adaptation" approach to schooling, nor the "accommodation" approach (in which standards and grades are deemphasized or abolished) can engender true humanity and an ethical attitude which might do justice to the individual pupil. This ethical awareness must arise in a society that values the '*Lebenskoennerschaft*' (Achenbach's term: the ability to live and authentic self-governed life) that is necessary for the recognition of true Bildung and is not something that can be a task of schools alone. Lebenskoennerschaft is not something that can be specifically aimed at. What Gadamer's Bildung adds to this is the larger context of meaning in which we gradually appropriate what we inherit from our culture and language and make it our own. Nietzsche emphasizes the self-undermining nature of this process of continual self-discovery.

³⁵ The Greek precursor to the German Bildung is Paideia, which means culture, education, and character development. It is the bringing forth of a flourishing human being, which in ancient Greece emphasized one's individuality always in relation to the collective. As Werner Jaeger says, this was a consciously pursued ideal. The Greeks "were the first to recognize that education means deliberately molding human character in accordance with an ideal... It starts from the ideal, not the individual. Above man as a member of a horde, and man as a supposedly independent personality, stands man as an ideal; and that ideal was the pattern towards which Greek educators as well as Greek poets, artists, and philosophers always looked..." "The Greek mind owes its superior strength to the fact that it was deeply rooted in the life of the community."³⁵ The Greeks provide a model for us culturally, just as Socrates provides a model for us individually, of what can be achieved in human life. But this model is not to be copied, certainly could not be. We are of a vastly different milieu. But the excellence achieved is a model and incentive for our own pursuit of our possibilities collectively and individually. And it is the pursuit of this possibility in individual Bildung that each of us is that is central in philosophical counseling as we shall see in Part 3 below.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed. Continuum, 2002, (p. 13)

view. Bildung always requires training in abstraction out of one's own immediate stance, i.e., **alienation**." However, according to Gadamer, "what constitutes the essence of Bildung is clearly not alienation as such, but **the return to oneself** (emphasis added)—which presupposes alienation, to be sure."³⁷ This movement away from and return to one's particularity is the movement toward authentic individuality and autonomy. Gadamer says, "In Bildung, that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one's own."³⁸ It is only in making it one's own that autonomy is approached. One does not have a sense of oneself and one's possibilities without this movement away from the narrow horizons of the particularity of immediate awareness. But it does not become one's own until it is lived in one's own particularity, rather than just abstractly known, for example, learning about the "Golden Rule" versus making it one's own because one's horizons have been radically altered in a genuine understanding and experience of what this principle tries to express. It is in such a consciousness that what **Hegel** calls "recognition" of the other (a vulnerable human being to whom things matter) and "reconciliation" (the overcoming of alienation from the other and from oneself) can take place.

Bildung is nothing fixed or measurable. "The cultivated consciousness has in fact more the character of a sense...that surpasses all of the natural sciences. It is a universal sense."³⁹ The "cultivated consciousness" of Bildung is an ability to apply this universal "**common sense**" or **reasonableness** to any concrete situation. **Aristotle's *phronesis*** is invoked here. The ability to respond "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence."⁴⁰ It is the ability to grasp the concrete circumstances in their infinite variety from a distance. According to Aristotle: "It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that degree of precision in each department which the nature of the subject allows: ...while a specialist can make judgments as to his own particular subject it requires a person of all-round education to form competent judgments about things in general..."⁴¹ For Aristotle, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue but only in its integral connection to the ethical and social virtues. Reason alone cannot produce virtue. Critical ability without the ethical virtues gives rise to mere cleverness governed

³⁷ Ibid. p. 14

³⁸ Ibid. p. 14

³⁹ Ibid. p. 17

⁴⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, 1106b21-3.

⁴¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, 1094b-1095a.

only by the particularity of desire. It takes **paideia or Bildung**, molding the individual according to an ideal such that reason can play its most powerful role in human ethical communal life, which in turn sets the necessary condition for a human being to achieve his or her own creative autonomy (and for Aristotle the final telos of pure contemplation for its own sake).

Gadamer rightly sees that Bildung is both a **necessary condition** for the autonomy and ability necessary to engage in the radical inquiry of philosophical hermeneutics and is equally an **inescapable outcome** of such radical inquiry since philosophical hermeneutics takes us to the **highest universality, a reflective awareness of the universal condition of finitude and linguisticity**. These two are inseparable and reciprocal. This reciprocity is itself a reflection of the hermeneutical circle that hermeneutics discloses in its inquiry into understanding and meaning. Philosophical hermeneutics begins with a *descriptive* phenomenology of the experience of understanding that engenders an awareness of the horizons that make understanding possible. It moves to a *normative* dimension.

B. The Normative Dimension of Philosophical Hermeneutics

The normative dimension of philosophical hermeneutics centers on **the recognition of other people** as sharing our same basic condition as vulnerable, fallible, interpreting beings to whom things matter. Ethical awareness begins with recognition of our commonality, recognizing the other as oneself. This is the **reciprocity** of Kant, the **recognition of the other** in Hegel (*Anerkennung*), and a way of achieving a genuine universality sought after in the expression of the many versions of the Golden Rule, the most widely expressed ethical principle in human societies. **There is an ethical demand in the recognition of the other as linguistic because to be a linguistic being is to already be a being to whom things matter**, a vulnerable being operating within horizons of a meaningful world. Conflict of interpretations is inevitable but the humility engendered by philosophical hermeneutics, which implores us to always take into consideration our own limits that enable and inhibit our understanding, makes it difficult to dismiss this most basic status of all vulnerable, valuing, linguistic beings. This basic vulnerability is not merely physical or emotional. Rather, the very meaning context of a **meaningful world** in which the meaningful experience of an emotion or a physical sensation arises is itself subject to rupture. It is **subject to the rupture of wonder, horror, anguish, and awe**. These primordial experiences, which are the basis for all the more surface emotions, are not

merely experiences of physical pleasure or pain or emotional joy, sorrow, fear, etc. At this deepest level they are the opening or the loss of my world. All other experiences are possible only as meaningful experiences **within** the horizons of my world. The powerful guiding normative hermeneutical perspective of individual *Bildung* and the “good common sense” of a broad human perspective have been lost as methodologies of science and instrumentalism have become the dominant model for approaching life. But science, though highly valuable, **cannot go to the heart of what it is to be human** nor can religious mythologies that have been turned into ideologies. They both must serve a much **broader and cultivated awareness of our condition for which hermeneutical rigor is not only appropriate, but necessary**. Methodologies of the natural science have their power in their narrowness, in their exactitude of mathematization. Such exactitude is highly valuable **so long as we recognize its limits**. Misapplication of exactitude to the study of anything human or social is a failure to recognize these limits, a **failure in good sense, a failure in *Bildung***. Mathematical exactitude and theoretical explanation in the natural sciences cannot be a model for the essentially interpretive studies of human beings and culture, nor for guiding society as a whole.⁴²

For Gadamer, the true meaning of education, *Bildung*, is

a never-ending process of openness and a perpetual fusion of horizons, arising through dialogue, in which the ideal is never to stop learning... The truly educated person — the true “hermeneuticist” — then, is “radically undogmatic.”⁴³

This requires the ability to **suspend judgment** and a powerful attitude of openness to having ones truths and habits of mind **overturned** through careful and sustained inquiry, which is essentially the definition of **philosophia, the eros of wisdom**. It must also be emphasized, however, that this “hermeneutical openness” is not the common conception of being “open minded” a kind of self-congratulation for escaping the worst forms of narrow mindedness. Hermeneutical openness only arises in the very challenging journey toward *Bildung*. That journey is not a quick fix, not a matter of the degrees and diplomas of contemporary cybernetic mass education conspicuous for its mediocrity and specialization. What Nietzsche said of his own time is even more relevant today. Education was marked by:

⁴² Science is highly valuable to us. But one can be scientific without being *scientistic*. Scientism, the view that the methods of science are the best or only path to understanding in every field of inquiry, is a kind of hubris that is the mark of a lack of *Bildung*, as is religious dogmatism. Just as one can be scientific without being *scientistic*, one can be religious and participate in the mystery that we honor in our mythologies without becoming religiously ideological and dogmatic. The achievement of *Bildung* is a developed human being, a human being who has undergone extensive intellectual and moral self-discipline and lives in the openness and distancing of radical hermeneutical inquiry that undermines all religious, scientific, and political dogmas.

⁴³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 355.

an indecent haste...as if something would be lost if the young man of twenty-three were not yet "finished," or if he did not yet know the answer to the "main question": *which* calling? A higher kind of human being, if one may say so...takes time, he does not even think of "finishing": At thirty, one is, in the sense of high culture, a beginner, a child.⁴⁴

This gives support to the contemporary idea of "life long learning," provided it is the pursuit of genuine Bildung and not just developing hobbies or an escape from boredom. It is **never too late for Bildung**. And it is always too early to have finished. True education, for Nietzsche, requires **excellence** in learning:

One must learn to *see*, one must learn to *think*, one must learn to *speak* and *write*: the goal in all three is a **noble culture**. Learning to see--accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; **postponing judgment**, learning to go around and grasp each individual case **from all sides**. That is the first preliminary schooling for **spirituality**: not to react at once to a stimulus, but to gain control of all the inhibiting, excluding instincts.... Learning to *think*: in our schools one no longer has any idea of this...even in the universities, even among the real scholars of philosophy.⁴⁵

It is only through education in the strong sense of Bildung, the education of the spirit that engenders something like Nietzsche's powerfully ethical sovereign individual, that Nietzsche's **"Great Health"** is made more likely.⁴⁶

Bildung, then in its strongest sense is a philosophical attitude and engagement. It is both the ability and desire (eros) to constantly gain a perspective on and then **suspend one's prejudices**, to see them as such, and exercise vigilance in what we called in Part I above the **"constant" turning" of philosophy** that never arrives at truths, only tentative insights in the service of a way of being in the world, an attitude that goes beyond any perspective. This attitude is not a perspective or a belief. It is more of a felt sense of both humility and confidence and a disposition toward life that frees us enough from our insecurities and the prisons of our truths to

⁴⁴ *Twilight of the Idols*, "What the Germans Lack", 5.

⁴⁵ *Twilight of the Idols*, "What the Germans Lack", 7.

⁴⁶ In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes of the possibility of a "Great Health", a kind of "zweiter Unschuld" (GM), II, 20a), a second innocence made possible by both the death of God (traditional Truth) and a different implementation of the human propensity to *aktiv Vergessenheit* "active forgetting" (GM II,1) which serves life and health. This forgetting, this "second innocence" is not a literal forgetting of one's past but a rebirth in which the significance of our past is radically transformed. It is a transformation in attitude toward life, the possibility of living without the motive of revenge, the possibility of seeing through the self-deceptive fictions that sustain us in the face of the challenge and struggle of life. It is the possibility of overcoming the desperate desire for permanence, chronophobia (fear of time), overcoming the desire for salvation from suffering, insecurity, uncertainty and from life itself, which is always one's own life. The overcoming of such motives is troped in the transforming idea of eternal recurrence and its post nihilistic correlates, the übermensch and the attitude of *amor fati*. These are signifiers of a possible type of consciousness, a way of living in which we have a radically different relationship to our past and our beliefs, which are no longer turned into truths. "Convictions are prisons," says Nietzsche.

engender a love of life in which we can embrace our finitude. The philosophical counseling experience is about the *Bildungs*-process of self-formation and self-overcoming, whatever particular problems and issues it may address along the way. It is what makes philosophical counseling, philosophical.

III. Philosophical Counseling, Philosophical Hermeneutics, and *Bildung*

There is an integral relation between *Bildung*, philosophical hermeneutics and philosophical counseling. *Bildung* is not merely an intellectual process or a collection of knowledge, but an enlargement of self and the horizons in which one views and interprets “the world.” *Bildung* is the development of an awareness of one’s own “true life’s way” and is the necessary preparation of an individual for the radical inquiry that engenders a genuine ethical awareness. *Philosophical hermeneutics* is the most radical of inquiries because it reveals the most basic condition of finitude and meaningfulness in any human life, regardless of particularity.. *Philosophical counseling* provides an occasion for radical questioning that is facilitated by the openness of the counselor in which this condition shows itself in the uniqueness of the individual. The philosophical counselor who is hermeneutically aware of his or her own horizons and what it means to have horizons has an enhanced ability to be receptive to this particular and unique world of meaningfulness of the counselee. Achenbach calls this the ability for “listening.” The philosophical counselor is not there to instruct or impart knowledge or wisdom, but to listen to and create a space for the coming forth of the individual “true life’s way,” the “true individual *Bildung*” of the counselee.⁴⁷ Philosophical counseling arises from desire-yearning-eros that gives rise to sustained inquiry.

The process of genuine or individual *Bildung* is a confrontation with our finitude that enlarges us and brings a greater awareness of our ethical engagement in the world. Genuine ethics can only arise out of genuine autonomy, not servitude to any moral “ought.” Ethics is not following a rule in order to do what is right. The worst wrongs have been carried out under this paradigm of morality. Genuine ethics comes from the “good sense” which arises in *Bildung*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See the respective articles by Achenbach and Lindseth in this volume

⁴⁸ The good sense of *Phronesis* in how to live that arises from *Paideia* or *Bildung* has been replaced in modernity by the search for an algorithm for morality. The assumption or faith of modernity since Descartes was that through reason we could find an indubitable foundation for truth, especially, moral truth. Many thought (and some still do) that Kant or Mill supplied this in the categorical imperative or in the principle of utility. The failure of any such algorithm for morality had a backlash in the absurdity of moral relativism. In Nietzsche we find a powerful alternative. His ideal of ethics of sovereign individuality, put forth in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is

Philosophical counseling provides a space for a movement toward greater hermeneutical awareness and the ethical good sense of *phronesis*⁴⁹ in the process of Bildung, all of which arises from the eros of wisdom and moves toward one's spiritual core of vulnerability away from narrow self-interest. Ethical awareness is not merely good-heartedness or kindness, though an attitude of compassion plays a crucial role in ethical awareness. Rather, good judgment or good sense is the core of ethical engagement in the world. Even if we had the best of intentions and deep compassion, without the good sense in action, the good judgment about what to do to most fully realize outcomes consistent with our best intentions and compassion, we would be lost.

Questioning the ordinary everyday meanings that make a human life possible is what makes it most worth living according to Socrates. It is a kind of sophisticated innocence or cultivated naiveté. It keeps refreshing that initial opening we call wonder that makes the world ever new.⁵⁰ We lose our integrity when we lose our connection to that core opening that keeps us humble and honest. Seeing through what we think we know and seeing into our basic condition is a kind of undoing that takes us to the core of our humanness. That spiritual core is our vulnerability, that things mean something and can matter to us at all. The worst thing that can happen to a human being is that nothing matters... THAT matters so deeply that there is total anguish, nothing to live for. It is not loss of life that is most threatening, but loss of meaningfulness.

To move toward the sacred core is to move toward a rebirth, a new beginning and the possibility of a new world. But typically we cling to our habits, to our illusions of truth, reality, and permanence and prevent any movement toward the sacred. To move toward the sacred is to give up all orientation, all truth, and all sense of the ordinary. It is to move into the abyss of the

built on a conception of Bildung and provides a deeply ironic undermining of the search for moral truths. The irony of Nietzsche's ethics is that it sees morality, which is supposedly aimed at protecting the individual, as actually a *lack of trust in the individual and merely a disguised attempt to control!* For Nietzsche, we must *trust* the individual (once we have given her the means to achieve autonomy, i.e. Bildung), in order to promote the authentic individuality upon which *genuine* ethics depends. Genuine ethics comes from within. Morality is a demand that comes from without, the demand of faith or reason imposed by society. Nietzsche's ethics begins with the *concrete achievement of the individual as the very basis of any ethics* (and if Nietzsche's genealogy is on the mark, has been the real source of moralities). This is an achievement of Bildung, self-formation that is very lengthy and takes a great deal of investment by society in the individual. Rather than obligation, this genuine ethics is based on respect for actually achieved sovereign individuality and recognizes this potential for self-overcoming in others. It is based on respect for life and its diversity, rather than on moral law and conformity. This movement toward such a transformation and sovereign individuality is in my view the *raison d'être* of philosophical counseling, insofar as it is truly philosophical.

⁴⁹ There is no Eros without Phronesis. Some kind of collective or societal "good sense" that is the condition of possibility for individuals to develop their own individual sense of things, their own "true life's way," as Lindseth calls it.

⁵⁰ "Of all our worlds, the everyday is the closest to being completely dead." (Miller, p. 99).

completely unknown. To give any interpretation of this, any attempt to possess it, make it a source of security is to lose it. To move toward the sacred is to risk everything. Without this risk, one does not move toward the sacred but merely remains within the safety and security of one's prejudices. The most radical philosophy is an attempt to make contact with this spiritual core of unknowing. This can engender a spiritual transformation. Philosophy is a means, not an end and the process of inquiry merges with myth and metaphor here rather than theory and literal truth in the attempt to say anything about this spiritual core of unknowing....

Philosophy as a spiritual practice is aimed at engendering an attitude of appreciation, respect, and reverence for the world and others. We need to see with an unsentimental objectivity and with confidence in the fruits of our long disciplining of the spirit (Bildung), together with genuine unselfish love for life, compassion for the vulnerability of others, and humility in the face of our ignorance and fallibility. These fruits are first, the ability to carefully observe and notice, and second, the ability to think very clearly and critically. In both of these we exercise a refined ability to suspend judgment, on the one hand, but can be decisive in our judgments when necessary, because we do see more clearly.⁵¹ Seeing more clearly is not seeing a truth. Rather, it is seeing through our truths and the consoling illusions and fantasies that usually absorb our attention.

Finally, this attitude we speak about here is a deep sense of trust in ourselves and life, not faith in a beyond that will provide salvation. It is not hope, no deep investment in any convictions. Rather a deep sense that the uncertainty and vulnerability we feel is not the enemy. The enemy is what we mindlessly do to escape uncertainty and vulnerability and the metaphysical-theoretical fantasies we lose ourselves in order to give ourselves the illusion and false hope that this basic condition can be overcome. To overcome our finitude and fallibility would be to lose our humanness altogether. To overcome the capacity for vulnerability would be also to lose our deep sense of wonder from which our intellectual curiosity and religious yearnings emerge and all things which make life meaningful

The great mystery that we try to penetrate with language in our religions, philosophies, and sciences is that there is anything at all, that there is something rather than nothing that shows itself in intelligible ways, i.e., we can say something about it. But even more mysterious than the fact that there is something there for us and that we are always making something of it, is that

⁵¹ To paraphrase Ramsey, we can't get perfectly clear on anything, but we can get clearer on some things.

there is a "there." This is the basic feature of meaningfulness, the basic feature of being for us: that it is immediate and concrete in a "there" and we further interpret (explain and abstract) from this given into all our "stories." The world is meaningfulness that always shows itself in a concrete immediate way, is always a meaningful presence or "there" for us. But we bury it under our interpretations and miss the "being there", the presence of anything, which is more fundamental than what we have made of it in our religious, metaphysical, scientific, common sense, and personal narratives.

It is this shared condition of "being there," of meaningfulness, and our vulnerability that is universal and unites us. There are no foundations for our claims about truth, knowledge, and reality, but there is this universal condition. Things only show up as interpreted within the horizons that our language, culture, and personal finite experience make possible. But we can see this "showing up" itself without getting caught in the meanings, the "truths" that enable this showing up, this presence. The horizons of our awareness are our inhibiting and our enabling limits. They give us our openness to everything, but are also the limits of our understanding and are the source of much of our conflict, our casting the world in terms of good and bad, but more ominously, good and evil. We create enemies out of "difference" that threatens our habits, patterns, truths, and goals. We confuse importance, that things matter deeply to us, with "truth" about what we take to be important. Out of our insecurities and need, truth becomes most important without any awareness that this is what has happened. Ironically, this cuts us off from our spiritual and ethical core. We fail to see that there is something more basic than truth, namely that things matter, that it is the "mattering" itself, rather than the "what" that is most primordial and provides the most basic ethical communality. What matters is always a meaning, an interpretation within finite temporary horizons of understanding and that is why truth matters because these truths are interpretations with which to meet the challenge of our finitude, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Whatever commitments or leaps of faith we make, it is the deep need to have such connectedness that is basic, not this or that interpretation. Meaning-giving is most primordial, not this or that meaning that we call "truth." What Paul Ricoeur named the "hermeneutic of suspicion," has freed us from earlier misconceptions about truth. But this has also unfortunately detached us from a sense of the sacred. This is because in the Western religious/intellectual tradition truth became most important, truth was sacred and the sacred was truth (Plato, Christianity, and scientism (dogmatic scientific realism)). Religion became

metaphysical and theoretical, something one believed in. Eros and its expression in mythos were subordinated to logos, the truths of reason, conceptual truth, truth as the security of absolute orientation, certainty and non ambiguity. **But truth has nothing to do with the sacred.** It is the **yearning for and pursuit of truth that has everything to do with it.** It is this yearning that pulls us **toward the sacred core of unknowing.** But it is impossible to approach the sacred through literal, historical, theoretical truth. Instead, approaching the sacred entails self-overcoming, including one's "truths." At their best, science and religion move us back to that **deep sense of awe and sense of humility.**

If we are genuinely engaged in our own process of self-overcoming, we can be deeply sensitive and evocative of this in others as a midwife, facilitator, or listener who finds wonder in the counselee with whom we share this moment. There is something sacred here, a deep respect and awe for the mystery that presents itself in every moment, in every person, in every thing. Suffering with this or that issue or problem is not to be overcome through a solution or resolution, but is the **path to our spiritual core.** **There is no "solution" to vulnerability.** The question is **courage and integrity with which one gives shape to one's life.** Rather than merely being helped to address particular problems by the critical thinking skills of the counselor, the counselee **is in-spired, the eros of wisdom is made his or her own.**

Many of those who tend to approach philosophical counseling as problem solving agree that the pursuit and exercise of the counselee's autonomy is paramount. But autonomy that remains ignorant of its own most basic core condition and motivation is no genuine autonomy. This core condition and motivation is revealed in the universality of the hermeneutical condition and pursued in the **practice of hermeneutical awareness.** Philosophical hermeneutics, therefore, provides a model and **indispensable resource** for philosophical counseling. The so-called tools of much of philosophical inquiry, conceptual analysis, argument analysis, thought experiments, etc., are not genuinely philosophical without the attitude of the eros of wisdom which knows that it does not know, recognizes its own finitude, and has some awareness of the linguisticity which is the very condition for entering into philosophical dialogue and using any philosophical tools at all.

The "problem solving" approach to philosophical counseling is indicative of a mind set that one also finds in contemporary medicine. The doctor treats symptoms (in philosophical counseling, "issues" or "problems"). In contrast, ancient Western practical or spiritual

philosophy treated any particular problem in the context of the general human **pursuit of spiritual wholeness**, equanimity, balance, and virtue. Living the good life was not simply addressing problems that became manifest. That would be to address the surface instead of the underlying spiritual condition of the person. The ancient philosophical facilitator (counselor) provided guidance in the process of **spiritual rebirth** for those who were ready for this journey.⁵² But unlike a contemporary physician who treats symptoms, the philosophical counselor must be drawn by the eros of wisdom to journey with the counselee as far as possible to his or her spiritual core, that core of deep vulnerability and finitude.

People come to philosophical counseling not just to deal with issues but because they are **caught in their meanings**. The sooner the counselee comes to realize the **fundamental hermeneutical task of self-understanding**, that **there are no uninterpreted facts**, and that we live in our meanings, the sooner he will be empowered to **open those meanings to reinterpretation and reappropriation**. Philosophical counseling helps **create a sacred space** for the counselee (and counselor) to **go to the spiritual core of unknowing where the ordinary can be set aside and one's sense of wonder can be replenished**. From this, **one's individual Bildung can gain new life in its movement toward integrity and autonomy**.

There is something basic to the human spirit that rises up against habit, security, and comfort that cannot always be deflected by narrow self-interest and the flow of the ordinary. There is a hunger for moving toward that spiritual core of vulnerability that is not always satisfied with religious ideologies or scientific instrumentalist explanations. This hunger or yearning is basic to our finitude and vulnerability and underlies the particular issues or problems presented by the counselee. This is the opening for philosophical counseling. It is what the philosophical counselor, as a **"physician of the soul,"** most centrally addresses. Seeing these life problems in the larger context that Bildung permits, (and in its most radical form, seeing them hermeneutically), opens to the counselee the possibility of the highest form of autonomy.

Nietzsche tells us the **Great Health**, the great transformation that is possible to everyone is to realize that **one's "past" is not fixed**. **One's "past" is a meaning, an interpretation**. It is always open to powerful reinterpretation and reappropriation, not by falsifying it, but by truly facing and embracing it with *amor fati*, love and acceptance of "one's own true way" (Lindseth). A new attitude is engendered by seeing through the conformity, habits and "truths" we cling to.

⁵² See Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*. Golden Sufi Center Publishing, 1999.

It is only when we have come to terms with our past that we are free to create our future.

Philosophy finally engenders such an attitude, not truth. It is ironic because it is in the pursuit of truth that we free ourselves from our illusions about truth and the eros of wisdom begins to arise.

The possibility that becomes the motivating impetus in one's life is to love one's life with honesty and with some awareness of one's illusions, one's creative interpretive "fictions" without resorting to the absurdities of relativism or objectivism and absolutism.

Human beings cannot live without some fixity of meaning, in other words, truth. But any "truth" though it usually is an attempt to unify, is ultimately divisive. We are not, however, left with an unbridgeable gap between people and cultures. There is a shared fraternity: However divided we may be by our "truths," however imperfect the generality of concepts is in conveying the uniqueness of our lived felt experience to each other, whatever incommensurability of meaning there surely is between cultures and individuals, we are all esteemers, valuers who judge and to whom things matter, who struggle with our vulnerability, fallibility, and finitude.

Philosophical counseling is an opportunity to evoke a sense of wonder and possibility, renewal, vitality, passion for the examined life and not merely the belief but the experience that it truly does make life worth living. Philosophical counseling is an opportunity to engage the counselee in the hermeneutical task of self-understanding, an awareness of our basic condition as meaning making interpreting beings that have a basic ethical engagement in the world. This ethical awareness is not guided by a set of rules or laws, but by an engagement with others as beings like ourselves who value and judge out of their deep vulnerability, beings to whom things matter, who live in the horizons of their meanings. Hermeneutics engenders an awareness of the universality of our shared condition without appeal to any dogmas, any absolutes, any metaphysical or epistemological commitments to objectivism or relativism, realism or anti realism, etc. Ultimately, it is a matter of hermeneutic skill, courage, and vigilance, not method or truth.

If there is any doubt such a life can be lived, Socrates provides a model. But as Nehamas rightly points out, Socrates comes to us full blown, an enigmatic model of integrity and virtue, a high example of paideia or Bildung and the examined life. He presents a model with no formula for its achievement. But that is exactly what the self-formation of Bildung requires, a high ideal to which each of us aspires with only ourselves to finally work this out in our own unique particularity from our own genuine autonomy. The point is not to copy Socrates, but to be

inspired by the ideal of the excellence of his life to pursue that same level of excellence in our own. Bildung is never merely finding “one’s own true way.” We are always in dialogue with our collective heritage in the very language we speak and customs we are raised with. It is impossible to be self without this. The task is not only finding some “true life’s way” but rather coming to see how one is necessarily already an extension and expression of one’s culture and language. The question of Bildung is always the question of how to make this truly one’s own.

At the center of this journey is the deep commitment to radical inquiry. There is something universal here but nothing rule-like, nothing that can be won through methodology. Rather, it is an achievement that must guide any and all use of methodology. It is always deeply self-questioning and non dogmatic. This achievement must be worked out in the struggle of the particularity of our own confrontation with finitude in the face of the mystery of being. This struggle and yearning is not to be overcome or escaped, but rather, fully embraced. To recognize our deep vulnerability and that this vulnerability and the horizons of our finitude are the mysterious source of all that matters. We cannot be liberated from this condition. But we can be liberated from our ignorance about this condition itself and from the beliefs that give us the illusion that we can escape it. It provides an opening for becoming liberated from our aversion to this vulnerability, and from all the psychological ploys and escapes, such as ideological and dogmatic metaphysical truths, myths of salvation, hedonistic life styles, victim mentality, blame, and condemnation.

I would like to end with a couple of favorite quotes that express succinctly the attitude of vigilance, courage, and eros that reflects the philosophical counseling experience at its best:

Helen Keller: Security is mostly a superstition, it does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits is strength undefeatable.

Virginia Woolf: Always look life in the face, then...
know it for what it is, and finally...
love it for what it is.

Nietzsche: What was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but something else--let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.