

pp. 38-58 from 'Meaning on the Model of Truth': Dewey & Gadamer on Habit & Vorurteil'

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The difference between mind and consciousness is crucial to Dewey's theory of experience and to my assessment of Gadamer's use of prejudice, so I should like to quote a rather long section wherein Dewey significantly deepens his analysis of mind and consciousness:

The relation between mind and consciousness may be indicated by a familiar happening. When we read a book, we are immediately conscious of meanings that present themselves, and vanish. These meanings existentially occurring are *ideas*. But we are capable of getting ideas from what is read because of an organized system of meanings of which we are not at any one time completely aware. Our mathematical or political "mind" is the system of such meanings as possess and determine our particular apprehensions or ideas. There is however a continuum or spectrum between this containing system and the meanings which, being focal and urgent, are the ideas of the moment. There is a contextual field between the latter and those meanings which determine the habitual direction of our conscious thoughts and supply the organs for their formation. One great mistake in the orthodox psychological tradition is its exclusive preoccupation with sharp focalization to the neglect of the vague shading off from the foci into a field of increasing dimness.

Discrimination in favor of the clearly distinguished has a certain practical justification, for the vague and extensive background is present in every conscious experience and therefore does not define the character of any one in particular. It represents that which is being used and taken for granted, while the focal phase is that which is imminent and critical. But this fact affords no justification for neglect and denial in theory of the dim and total background consciousness of every distinct thought. If there were a sharp division between the ideas that are focal as we read a certain section of a book and what we have already read, if there were not carried along a sense of the latter, what we now read could not take the form of an idea. Indeed, the use of such words as context and background, fringe, etc., suggests something too external to meet the facts of the case. The larger system of meaning suffuses, interpenetrates, colors what is now and here uppermost; it gives them sense, feeling, as distinct from signification.³³

What do we do—or what happens to us—when we read a book? I think it is possible to argue that Dewey's answer presupposes the hermeneutic

circle, but that he would consider this an incomplete response to the question. Yes, the “focal” meanings or the “ideas of the moment” contribute to an understanding of the whole, and this “containing system” determines the meaning of “what is now and here uppermost.” The remarkable matter for Dewey was not the circular nature of understanding, but rather the fact that movement between part and whole—movement within the “contextual field”—was accomplished through having a “sense of” rather than through an explicit “knowing.” This “sense of” is an expression and achievement of the silent workings of habit, and it is only through this “sensing” that the specification of distinct ideas is possible. What is projected and conserved in our “sense of” is not an idea or belief seeking confirmation. Having a “sense of” is not an anticipation of truth.

Dewey was not satisfied that the example of reading a book fully explained the dialectic between background and focus, habitual meaning and idea, so he offers another example:

Change the illustration from reading a book to seeing and hearing a drama. The emotional as well as intellectual meaning of each presented phase of a play depends upon the operative presence of a continuum of meanings. If we have to remember what has been said and done at any particular point, we are not aware of what is now said and done; while without its suffusive presence in what is now said and done we lack clew to its meaning. Thus the purport of past affairs is present in the momentary cross-sectional idea in a way which is more intimate, direct and pervasive than the way of recall. It is positively and integrally carried in and by the incidents now happening; these incidents are, in the degree of genuine dramatic quality, fulfillment of the meanings constituted by past events; they also give this system of meanings an unexpected turn, and constitute a suspended and still indeterminate meaning, which induces alertness, expectancy. It is this double relationship of continuation, promotion, carrying forward, and of arrest, deviation, need of supplementation, which defines that focalization of meanings which is consciousness, awareness, perception. Every case of consciousness is dramatic; drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness.³⁴

In viewing a play, I do not “remember” or “recall” earlier parts of it. The “purport of past affairs” is present through a “sense of” rather than a “conception of”; this retentive and protentive “sense of” is the horizontal

structure "which defines that focalization of meanings which is consciousness, awareness, perception." Because our habit-born "sense of" is projective and anticipatory, as well as retentive and conserving, their meeting in the present is essentially dramatic, indeterminate, open. The fusion of past, present, and future is suspenseful and uncertain; my "sense of" may or may not be fulfilled as expected or anticipated. The projections of habit are solicitations of possible meanings, meanings that exist more as a vibrating "atmosphere" than a set of hypotheses awaiting confirmation. Parts or episodes are contextualized against the background of habitual meanings; background is modified and reconstructed as it presses forward and is challenged by episode or part, giving these background, habitual meanings "an unexpected turn."

Dewey's theory of habitual meaning not only permits but requires a broadened conception of understanding. An adequate theory of experience, and its intelligibility in and to understanding, is not a theory of knowledge, truth, or method. The entire thrust and spirit of Dewey's conception of habitual meaning is antagonistic to the view that one understands the meaning of an object when one can see, know, establish its truth. The circle of anticipation and fulfillment proposed in Dewey's conception of background, habit, and sensing, does not presuppose truth, though it *can* take a course of truth-seeking. When we understand something—a poem, a disappointment, an explanation, or a child's hurt feelings—we are not simply settling doubt, fixing belief, getting at "the truth." We can understand these sorts of objects because "every empirical situation has its own organization of a direct, non-logical character,"³⁵ an organization prepared by habit and our "senses of."

The historicity of understanding and its anticipatory/fulfilling organization of the world cannot be reduced to "objects of a cognitive regard, themes of an intellectual gesture."³⁶ Experience in which habit is at work is historical consciousness, and because habit makes possible being and having things in "ways other than knowing them, in ways never identical with knowing them," historical consciousness cannot be identified with knowing consciousness. Dewey questions the priority of the known because in a sense, he must: His theory of habit establishes the intelligibility of the world prior to acts of knowing consciousness. The world's intelligibility, its understandability, is not equivalent to knowledge and its lessons in "how to conduct doubt profitably."³⁷ My habitual understanding of the world is "not an affair of truth or falsity, certitude, or doubt, but one of existence."³⁸

The fact that there is a "contextual field" joining background habitual meanings and focal ideas accounts for Dewey's opposition to the "reduction

of experience to states of consciousness."³⁹ There is more in experience than what we know, and more in experience than what we are conscious of. Understanding cannot be restricted to a "conscious act or state," to what is present to consciousness. An adequate theory of understanding must recognize that "what is not explicitly present makes up a vastly greater part of experience than does the conscious field to which thinkers have so devoted themselves."⁴⁰ My understanding is a consequence, an outcome, of what is no longer explicitly present. This absence—the past—is present in my habits. The presence of the past is habit's accomplishment.

The horizons projected by habit are not necessarily explicit, are not necessarily seen as horizons waiting to be seized by conscious attention and harmonized with each other. Any account of how habits of mind are both validated and fulfilled, when mind is understood as "the field of mind—of operative meanings," must provide for the "continuum of meanings" joining implicit mind and explicit, focalizing consciousness. Failing this, one will have a truncated theory of understanding because the absent—"the larger system of meanings" which "suffuses, interpenetrates, colors what is now and here uppermost"—will be construed as a virtual presence, a virtual state of explicit consciousness.

The implicit horizon of habitual meanings is not constituted by assumptions, expectations, hypotheses waiting to come to validated presence in knowing consciousness. "The flying moment is sustained by an atmosphere that does not fly, even when it most vibrates." The ways in which I adjust, adapt, and respond to the world are not restricted to the validation of those habitual meanings which constitute the atmosphere of my world and my experience. The world becomes meaningful for me between and around criteria for validity and truth; similarly, the world is not intelligible to me solely or primarily through what is "explicitly present." In short, the full presence of meaning to consciousness, specifically, knowing consciousness, is not Dewey's norm or standard of intelligibility or understanding because it is not habit's norm of intelligibility or understanding.

III

Many of the main components of Gadamer's theory of prejudice are contained in the following passage from "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem":

It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to

restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, 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 biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, “Nothing new will be said here.” Instead we welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity. But how do we know the guest whom we admit is one who has something *new* to say to us? Is not our expectation and our readiness to hear the new also necessarily determined by the old that has already taken possession of us? The concept of prejudice is closely connected to the concept of authority, and the above image makes it clear that it is in need of hermeneutical rehabilitation. Like every image, however, this one too is misleading. The nature of the hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true.⁴¹

There is a central point to note about this formulation of prejudice or prejudgement. Prejudices are not merely “biases of our openness to the world”; rather, we are opened to the world as truth seekers and knowers. Prejudices do not “inevitably distort the truth” but rather through them “we are opened up for the new, the different, the true.” Gadamer makes this clear in the introduction to *Truth and Method*, stating that the book does not stop with a justification of the “truth of art” but instead “tries to develop from this starting-point a concept of knowledge and of truth which corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience.”⁴² Gadamer is concerned with truths that “go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge,” but he is nonetheless concerned with truth.

When we understand, we understand the actual or possible truth of something; as conditions of such understanding, prejudices, unlike habits,

are, to use Dewey's words, "objects of a cognitive regard, themes of an intellectual gesture."⁴³ A closer examination of Gadamer's conception of prejudice, knowledge, and experience will reveal a strikingly different view than Dewey's of "the conditions in which understanding takes place,"⁴⁴ precisely because it restricts these conditions to the ability of prejudice to know the truth. The meaningfulness of habit, the sense of habit for Dewey, is not limited to meanings known and known as true. Thus, Gadamer accepts what Dewey explicitly rejects, "that all experiencing is a mode of knowing."⁴⁵

Whether translated as prejudice, prejudgement, or preconception, there is little doubt that the history carried or embodied in *Vorurteile* is an epistemological history. Early in the section on "Prejudices as Conditions of Understanding," Gadamer notes that "justified prejudices" are "productive of knowledge."⁴⁶ Later, Gadamer states that when attempting to understand an author's text, "we try to accept the objective validity of what he is saying."⁴⁷ The value of temporal distance is that it "lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully."⁴⁸ The truth of one's prejudices and the claim to truth of a text form a kind of epistemological embrace, one founded on the principle that "the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process."⁴⁹ Through temporal distance the "really critical question of hermeneutics" can be solved: "distinguishing the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand."⁵⁰ Our past, our history, is not embodied in us simply as determinate or indeterminate capacities, or as a determinate or indeterminate horizon. Our history is composed of "true prejudices" and "false ones."

Since prejudices are "conditions whereby we experience something," and since we are constantly called upon to "test" our prejudices—to determine their truth or falsity—it is not surprising that Gadamer's theory of experience emphasizes its openness, i.e., its openness to new confirmations and rejections of prejudices. He states that "the fact that experience is valid, so long as it is not contradicted by new experience (*ubi non reperitur instantia contradictoria*), is clearly characteristic of the general nature of experience, no matter whether we are dealing with its scientific form, in the modern experiment, or with the experience of daily life that men have always had."⁵¹ The entire section titled "The Concept of Experience and the Essence of the Hermeneutical Experience," leaves little doubt that Gadamer does not object to science's quest for truth, but rather its forgetfulness that truth and history are not antagonistic but rather complementary:

Modern science thus simply carries through in its methodology what experience has always striven after. Experience is valid only if it is confirmed; hence its dignity depends on its fundamental repeatability. But this means that experience, by its very nature, abolishes its history. This is true even of everyday experience, and how much more for any scientific version of it. Thus it is not just a chance one-sided emphasis of modern scientific theory, but has a foundation in fact, that the theory of experience is related teleologically to the truth that is derived from it.⁵²

Gadamer's theory of experience is a theory of knowing experience, and though he objects to the "epistemological schematization" of experience which "diminishes its original meaning"⁵³ for him, it is clear that truth and falsity are inherent properties of our experience of things, i.e., the "inner historicity of experience" is mediated by "true" and "false" prejudices. This is why Gadamer believes that validity—what is "not contradicted by new experience"—is "characteristic of the general nature of experience."⁵⁴ Through the negative, through what "runs counter to our expectation," we can continue to find the truth, to search for it. So, it is not a "higher form of knowledge" reached by the experienced man, but instead an aversion to dogmatism. Our prejudices must be tested, they must answer to reality. This is why Gadamer says:

Experience teaches us to recognize reality. What is properly gained from all experience, then is to know what is. But "what is," here, is not this or that thing, but "what cannot be done away with" (*was nicht mehr umzustossen ist*—Ranke).⁵⁵

Knowledge of "what cannot be done away with" is the fulfillment of experience, knowledge is what is gained from all experience.

Gadamer is entirely consistent in his belief that understanding is knowing, that "reaching the truth" is "always our goal."⁵⁶ *Vorurteile* are instruments of truth-seeking and truth-making. Experience, it follows, is a sort of battleground upon which our "readiness to recognize the other as potentially right and to let him or it prevail against me" arises out of, and must struggle against, the tradition embodied in my prejudices:

Every experience is a confrontation. Because every experience sets something new against something old and in every case it remains

open in principle whether the new will prevail—that is, will truly become experience—or whether the old, accustomed, predictable will be confirmed in the end. . . . So it is basically with all experience. It must either overcome tradition or fail because of tradition. The new would be nothing new if it did not have to assert itself anew against something.⁵⁷

Vorurteile are the persisting, continuity-making structures of experience, the epistemological braces without which past, present, future could not present themselves as historicity. The entire life of these braces is devoted to acting as a kind of frontier—an epistemological frontier—along which the new and the old confront each other, each seeking dominion and with one or the other being “confirmed.” This is Gadamerian experience.

To think of *Vorurteile* as epistemological frontier underscores two very important points regarding their nature and function in experience. The task of *Vorurteile* is to invest the object not simply with meaning, but meaning that seeks validation as its perfection. *Vorurteile*-based understanding necessarily involves the use of criteria of truth. Meanings may be projected falsely, they may not be true to the *Sache selbst*. One must thus be on guard that one’s experience is not guided by “inappropriate fore-meanings,” i.e., meanings that “come to nothing in the working-out.”⁵⁸ Which meanings are to be allowed passage through the epistemological frontier? Those that are legitimate,⁵⁹ whose nature permits experience to affirm their truth and correctness. The aim of understanding—and experience—is truth, not definitive truth but truth nonetheless. The truth function of understanding is so central to Gadamer that he accords it a transcendent status: “Every textual understanding presupposes that it is guided by transcendent expectations, expectations whose origins must be looked for in the relation between the intentional object of the text and the truth.”⁶⁰ Experience perfects itself when it has been confirmed, when it has uncovered what is true.

The second point has already been mentioned. *Vorurteile* as the braces of experience are constantly confronted with challenges to their validity; hence, openness to experience is a necessary feature of all experience:

Experience is always actually present only in the individual observation. It is not known in a previous universality. Here lies the fundamental openness of experience to new experience, not only in the general sense that errors are corrected, but that it is, in its

essence, dependent on constant confirmation and necessarily becomes a different kind of experience where there is no confirmation (*ubi reperitur instantia contradictoria*).⁶¹

New experience may contradict our *Vorurteile* and require their revision. This negative or negating aspect of experience requires that the epistemological frontier provided by *Vorurteile* be kept open and be prized for its openness. The *Vorurteile* that have proved to be true in past experience may become too settled, too satisfied with their successes, thus making the past unavailable for modification by the present and new. What our *Vorurteile* lead us to expect and what they actually encounter should occasion a reexamination of their merits, their truth.

Experience is thus a series of minor and major epistemological crises. The epistemological frontier of *Vorurteile* is the scene of an endless battle between truth claims. As we mature, as we gain more experience and become more experienced, we come to be less surprised by the failures of our past to truly grasp the present. Rather, I develop a positive readiness for such epistemological dislocation and rebuilding precisely because I know that my history may be proved wrong. This is why Gadamer believes that it is with Hegel that "the element of historicity comes into its own. He conceives experience as scepticism in action."⁶² The experienced person is precisely one who is able to learn from experience and who has learned from experience:

. . . the experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.⁶³

The epistemological frontier must be an open frontier, it can have no borders other than the provisional ones established by *Vorurteile* that are "borne out by the things themselves." The epistemological frontier constructed by *Vorurteile* requires the experienced person to keep alert to his prejudices: "A person who does not accept that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what is shown by their light."⁶⁴ The experienced person "knows the limitedness of all prediction and the uncertainty of all plans. In

him is realised the truth-value of experience."⁶⁵ The value of experience is measured and realised by its truth; openness is one of the necessary conditions and consequences for the fulfillment of the transcendent expectation of understanding—knowledge and truth.

Because *Vorurteile* are so insistent, because the truths they embody appear so natural and beyond doubt, what Gadamer calls temporal distance is needed in order to let "the true meaning of the object emerge fully."⁶⁶ Temporal distance is the filter enabling the interpreter to separate the "productive prejudices that make understanding possible from the prejudices that hinder understanding and lead to misunderstanding."⁶⁷ Temporal distance might be conceived of as the temporalization of the epistemological frontier of *Vorurteile*.

The immediate results of the confrontation between old and new cannot be counted on to determine whether the "true meaning" of an object has emerged. Truth must be assessed in time—"in time you will understand." Temporal distance reminds us that "we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth."⁶⁸ What is immediately given does not exhaust what is or may be true. Temporal distance instructs us in the art of questioning our prejudices, of risking them in the play of the epistemological frontier. Through the question—the essence of which "is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities"⁶⁹—we can suspend the validity of a prejudice in order to establish whether it comes closer to, or further away from, the "true meaning" of the object.

Experience for Gadamer means we must talk about the truth of experience, and the truth of experience requires us to talk about the openness of experience and a preparedness for revision: "The hermeneutical consciousness has its fulfillment, not in its methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man by comparison with the man captivated by dogma."⁷⁰ In the section titled "The Hermeneutical Priority of the Question," Gadamer seeks to deepen his reflection on openness, he wishes to "examine the logical structure of openness."⁷¹ He commences his analysis with the proposition that "we cannot have experience without asking questions."⁷² Through questioning, we see the openness of experience, the "openness of being this or that."⁷³ Questioning finds its fulfillment "in a radical negativity: the knowledge of not knowing."⁷⁴ Experience has the structure of a question, and "the deciding of the question is the way to knowledge."⁷⁵ The objects we seek to understand, their very presence in our experience, are answers to

questions; to understand these objects, we must understand the question to which the object is an answer.

In Gadamer's discussion of questioning, we find one of the central passages where the epistemological frontier of competing truth claims is contrasted with meaning:

The close relation that exists between question and understanding is what gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension. However much a person seeking understanding may leave open the truth of what is said, however much he may turn away from the immediate meaning of the object and consider, rather, its deeper significance, and take the latter not as true, but merely as meaningful, so that the possibility of its truth remains unsettled, this is the real and basic nature of a question, namely to make things indeterminate. Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing.⁷⁶

Questioning bids us to "leave open the truth," to leave it "unsettled," by treating competing truth claims "merely as meaningful." Meaning is a prelude to truth. Meaning is truth composing itself, unsettled and indeterminate. Meaning is an intermediary, neither chaos nor truth. Meaning waits to be, aims to be, true meaning, destined to be eternally questioned in the epistemological frontier of truth-establishing *Vorurteile*. While there certainly are places where Gadamer seems to allow *Vorurteile* to function as vehicles for a sort of existential comprehension of the world, they are far fewer than those where *Vorurteile* assert their need to have a meaning's truth determined before that meaning can claim any other kind of merit or importance. In this sense, Dreyfus was right to say of Gadamer that "at times he seems to side with cognitivists like Quine." My own analysis suggests that these times constitute a much larger proportion than Dreyfus seems to think. For Gadamer, truth aids, benefits, and ultimately reveals existence more profoundly than the "merely" meaningful.

At the risk of overextending this metaphor of *Vorurteile* as epistemological frontier, it is important to mention one other aspect of this frontier. Besides being the field upon which true and false prejudices vie for dominion, and besides the necessity that the frontier be open, the frontier is also unifying. If parts of the frontier did not have some connection to each other, if there were a significant lack of coherence among its parts, the legitimacy of the parts and the integrity of the whole would be in doubt.

The “hermeneutic circle” is understanding’s system of checks and balances: Part and whole must be fitted to each other so as to establish their harmony:

The movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.⁷⁷

Understanding is not simply circular, nor does it merely seek unity. It anticipates a unity of meaning as a formal condition of understanding:

The anticipation of completion that guides all our understanding is, then, always specific in content. Not only is an immanent unity of meaning guiding the reader assumed, but this understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning which proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said.⁷⁸

The *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* permits us to expect a text to present a unity of meaning and to expect what it says to be true. If we could not expect unity and truth, the epistemological frontier would dissolve or disintegrate, leaving us defenseless in our effort to winnow out true from false *Vorurteile*. If *Vorurteile* are the epistemic braces of experience, not only is the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* a necessary condition for their effective functioning, it also defines their purpose: “The anticipation of perfect coherence presupposes not only that the text is an adequate expression of a thought, but also that it really transmits to us the truth.”⁷⁹ Only a coherent unity or completion of meaning is understandable, but of even greater importance to Gadamer is the conviction that in presupposing the unity of understood meanings, we have a basis for questioning the truth of our *Vorurteile*. Unity is truth’s ally, and though the epistemological frontier of *Vorurteile* must be open and permeable, it cannot be fragmented and uncoordinated.

Before proceeding to a consideration of how habit and *Vorurteil* understand a letter, the main point of Gadamer’s position should be summarized. Rising above all other considerations, *Vorurteile* are servants of truth. Prejudices “constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to

experience."⁸⁰ This "initial directedness" is an epistemological direction. In understanding a text "what we always expect is that it will *inform* us of something."⁸¹ *Vorurteile* are a living record of what we know and what we can know. *Vorurteile* see the world as validities and confirmations, agreements and disagreements, questions decided and questions left open. The historicity of understanding is inseparable from the epistemic subject, for our "initial directedness" always involves criteria of truth.

All understanding is a claim to understand, and as a claim it demands an examining response to determine if its claim is true or false. A prejudice is not simply a taken-for-granted meaning, a useful meaning, a reliable meaning. A prejudice reaches out to the world to be tested and either verified or overthrown. Its place in the world is not secured until it has been tested and its validity established. Understanding is haunted by misunderstanding: That is not what that book, statement, wallpaper, glance means. You have misunderstood. What we gain from experience is knowledge; prejudice-grounded experience aims at agreement and confirmation, and though it constantly questions itself and its achievements, "the deciding of the question is the way to knowledge."⁸² *Vorurteile* are the bases of a world well or poorly known, and to experience the world is to know it well or poorly, it is to be "open to the claim to truth."

IV

To contrast habit and prejudice as sharply as possible, I will use an example offered by Gadamer: reading a letter. How do we understand a letter? Which concept—habit or prejudice—gives us a better basis for determining, in Gadamer's words, "what is common to all modes of understanding?" Does one or the other concept too narrowly restrict what understanding a letter consists of? What kind of being is it who understands a letter?

Gadamer's example of letter-reading occurs in his treatment of the fore-conception of completion and truth:

The anticipation of completion that guides all our understanding is, then, always specific in content. Not only is an immanent unity of meaning guiding the reader assumed, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning which proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter, i. e., considers what he writes as true, and is not trying to

understand the alien meanings of the letter writer, so we understand texts that have been handed down to us on the basis of expectations of meaning which are drawn from our own anterior relation to the subject. And just as we believe the news reported by a correspondent because he was present or is better informed, we are fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is better informed than we are, with our previously formed meaning. It is only when the attempt to accept what he has said as true fails that we try to "understand" the text, psychologically or historically, as another's meaning. The anticipation of completion, then, contains not only this formal element that a text should fully express its meaning, but also that what it says should be the whole truth.⁸³

A letter: 1. offers news 2. which we take to be true, i.e., a true account of some event.

Gadamer uses the same example of reading a letter in "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," and it is part of the same discussion of what the translator here calls the "anticipation of 'perfect coherence'" and the transcendent expectation of truth:

When we receive a letter, we see what is communicated through the eyes of our correspondent, but while seeing things through his eyes, it is not his personal opinions, but, rather, the event itself that we believe we ought to know by this letter. In reading a letter, to aim at the personal *thoughts* of our correspondent and not at the matters *about which* he reports is to contradict what is meant by a letter. Likewise, the anticipations implied by our understanding of a historical document emanate from our relations to "things" and not the way these "things" are transmitted to us. Just as we give credence to the news in a letter, because we assume that our correspondent personally witnessed the event or has validly learned of it, in the same way we are open to the possibility that the transmitted text may offer a more authentic picture of the "thing itself" than our own speculations. Only the disappointment of having let the text speak for itself and having then arrived at a bad result could prompt us to attempt "understanding" it by recourse to a supplementary psychological or historical point of view.⁸⁴

Again a letter: 1. offers news about an event 2. which we "ought to know."
A letter for Gadamer transmits a truth, it is a truth claim. Although

considerable attention has been devoted to the question of precisely what Gadamer means by truth, it does not appear to be such an esoteric matter when the letter example is carefully considered. This example seems to me to seriously weaken the effectiveness of any Heideggerian shield that might be raised to protect Gadamer from the sort of criticism I am making of his position. A letter informs us about an event and we permit ourselves to be compelled by that information because "the correspondent personally witnessed the event or has validly learned of it." A letter is an assertion about what is or was, of what truly is or was, about the "matters" reported on, not the "personal *thoughts*" of the reporter. Our response to a letter, like our response to any understandable object, is governed by the norm of truth, a norm of truth that does not appear to be grounded in any sort of existential comprehension that might be expected from a Heideggerian hermeneutics.

Following is a portion of a letter from Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, written in 1924:

The boys had been made uncommonly interesting to themselves by Meiklejohn. They fancied themselves as thinkers. At Amherst you *thought*, while at other colleges you merely *learned*. (Wherefore if you love him, send your only son and child to Amherst.) I found that by thinking they meant stocking up with radical ideas, by learning they meant stocking up with conservative ideas—a harmless distinction, bless their simple hearts. I really liked them. It got so I called them young intelligences—without offense. We got on like a set of cogwheels in a clock. They had picked up the idea somewhere that the time was past for the teacher to teach the pupil. From now on it was the thing for the pupil to teach himself using, as he saw fit, the teacher as an instrument. The understanding was that my leg was always on the table for anyone to seize me by that thought he could swing me as an instrument to teach himself with. So we had an amusing year. I should have had my picture taken just as I sat there patiently waiting, waiting for the youth to take education into their own hands and start the new world. Sometimes I laughed and sometimes I cried a little internally. I gave one course in reading and one course in philosophy, but they both came to the same thing. I was determined to have it out with my younger and betters as to what thinking really was. We reached an agreement that most of what they had regarded as thinking, their own and

other peoples, was nothing but voting—taking sides on an issue they had nothing to do with laying down. But not on that account did we despair. We went bravely to work to discover, not only if we couldn't have ideas, but if we hadn't had them, a few of them, at least, without knowing it. Many were ready to give up beaten and own themselves no thinkers in my sense of the word. They never set up to be original. They never pretended to put this and that together for themselves, never had a metaphor, never made an analogy. But they had, I knew. So I put them on the operating table and proceeded to take ideas they didn't know they had out of them as a prestidigitator takes rabbits and pigeons you have declared yourself innocent of out of your pockets trouserslegs and even mouth. Only a few resented being thus shown up and caught with the goods on them.⁸⁵

It is possible to confirm what Frost says. Each sentence can be taken to be a truth claim. The boys could be polled to determine if they in fact believed what Frost imputed to them; members of the faculty could be queried; perhaps Frost's relatives could be contacted. Naturally, this is not how we understand Frost's letter, or at least it is not the principal way in which we understand the letter. We do not read Frost's letter as a confirmable or falsifiable report on education at Amherst. Gadamer steadfastly maintains that the text "really transmits to us the *truth*."⁸⁶ But what truths is Frost transmitting to us? What the attitudes of his "youngers" were? That he called them "young intelligences"?

Gadamer makes the remarkable claim that "in reading a letter to aim at the personal *thoughts* of our correspondent and not at the matters *about which* he reports is to contradict what is meant by a letter." This is true if the primary intent of all letter-writing is the promotion of knowledge. Our interest, however, in Frost and his teaching is not his knowledge of pedagogy or Amherst traditions. It is not principally the tenability of his beliefs about "the boys" that commands our attention. The ways in which Frost's wit and invention work upon us are not reducible to what he knew and did not know. Frost is not presenting a thesis about education at Amherst, and we do not understand it as such. In Dreyfus's language, we do not need to believe it to understand it.

Gadamer's letter example is critically important since it provides one of the clearest examples in *Truth and Method* of what he means by "truth." Truth may be disclosure, self-knowledge, dialogue, "fusion of horizons,"

Vollkommenheit, etc. The letter example makes clear that although truth may also be these sorts of things for Gadamer, it is at least knowledge in the rather straightforward sense of asking someone, How do you know that? Is that really true? In other words, Is what you say knowledge of the *Sache Selbst* or just “personal thoughts”? In understanding a letter, I understand “the event itself that we believe we ought to know by this letter.” This view of letter-writing and letter-reading as a vehicle for knowledge claims supports Gadamer’s central contention: “The primordial significance of the idea of understanding is that of ‘knowing about something.’”⁸⁷ As the bases of understanding and our “initial directedness,” *Vorurteile* are dedicated to “knowing about something.”

Dewey would not, I think, read Frost’s letter as an instance of “knowing about something” since his idea of habit leads to the conclusion that “objects are found and dealt with in many other ways than those of knowledge.”⁸⁸ Both Dewey and Gadamer agree that to grasp the universality and historicity of understanding requires, in Dewey’s words, “beginning back of any science.”⁸⁹ For Dewey this means beginning back of knowledge. To understand Frost’s letter, it is not necessary to read it as a report providing information about an event “we ought to know.” The experience prompted by Frost’s letter exemplifies and confirms Dewey’s belief that “things present themselves in characteristic context, with different savors, colors, weights, tempos and directions.”⁹⁰ The “savors” and “colors” motivated by a phrase like “young intelligences” are not equivalent to “knowing about something.” Knowledge is simply not the relevant standard or measure in our experience of “young intelligences.” What is in my experience of “young intelligences,” of thinking as “voting,” and my general experience of Frost’s gentle, playful provocations confirms Dewey’s central contention that “what is really ‘in’ experience extends much further than that which at any time is *known*.”⁹¹ This is not a condition that can be overcome, simply because habit gives us an affinity to the world in ways not governed, in the first instance, by questions of doubt, belief, and verification. Not all our habits are prejudgments or preconceptions waiting for justification or rejection.

Let us take as another example a letter from James Agee to Father Fiye, written in 1938:

At the same time, I feel more shaken, confused, and ignorant, through my own actions, than I can remember having felt before. Yet my sense of confusion, ignorance, guilt and disintegrity is not to

be cured by reversing and betraying such few things as in all faith and vigilance and scepticism not only of authority but of myself, still seem to me to be so. Quite plainly I know that in the most important things, or many of them, in my existence, I cannot know for sure what I am doing, or why, or at all surely the difference between right and wrong, which latter very often appear to be identical or so interlocked that the destruction of one entails the destruction of the other, like separating Siamese twins who use the same heart and bloodstream. This may simply mean that he who moves beyond the safety of rules finds himself inevitably in the "tragedy" of the "human condition," which rules have been built to avoid or anaesthetize, and which must be undertaken without anaesthetic: but I am suspicious of laying pity and grief and sadness to such a general, fatal source rather than to a source for which I am personally responsible.⁹²

From Gadamer's perspective, this letter is not really a letter but a "treatise":

Letters . . . are an interesting transitional phenomenon: a kind of written conversation that, as it were, stretches out the movement of talking at cross purposes before seeing each other's point. The art of writing letters consists in not letting what one says become a treatise on the subject, but making it acceptable to the correspondent. But it also consists, on the other hand, in preserving and fulfilling the measure of finality possessed by everything stated in writing.⁹³

Is Agee attempting to get Father Flye to see his point? Is he attempting to make his doubts and confusions "acceptable" to Father Flye? What knowledge claims is Agee making? What shall we resolve or decide having read Agee's letter? That he was depressed? That he was insincere? Shallow? Self-destructive? When *Vorurteile* engage this letter they begin a movement of understanding wherein my projected meanings either are or "are not borne out by the things themselves." Are my prejudices "productive of knowledge"?⁹⁴ Is, however, the cognitive significance of Agee's letter reducible to what knowledge it affords?

I do not ask whether there is warrant for Agee's remark that right and wrong are "so interlocked that the destruction of one entails the destruction of the other," simply because I do not take it as a claim. Gadamer

insists that "understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such."⁹⁵ How is this possible? Is Agee's "content" distinguishable from his "meaning"? For Gadamer it must be and is. In understanding the "content" of the letter, in being open to the experience it may provide us, Gadamer believes we shall be "knowing about something."

Dewey would understand Agee's letter differently. The meanings solicited by Agee's letter and those solicited by my habits form a pact, the dramatic nature of which is not simply an anticipation of a "truly valid understanding."⁹⁶ My first hold on Agee's meanings is not necessarily inspired by a desire to "conform to what the thing is,"⁹⁷ i. e., my experience of Agee's is not controlled by a desire to make true statements about it. Dewey undoubtedly would criticize Gadamer's philosophy of experience as a not-so-well-disguised intellectualism:

By "intellectualism" as an indictment is meant the theory that all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such. The assumption of "intellectualism" goes contrary to the facts of what is primarily experienced. For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things *had* before they are things cognized.⁹⁸

My experience of Agee experiencing himself, including my enjoyment and endurance of his experience, is not a "mode of knowing," is not a Gadamerian "knowing about something." It is not simply the methodic knowledge of science—"the refined objects of science"—which Dewey indicts in his criticism of intellectualism, but all systems which forget that "*being* and *having* things in ways other than knowing them, in ways never identical with knowing them, exist, and are preconditions of reflection and knowledge."⁹⁹ "Being" and "having" are not deficient modes of experience or understanding. The meanings brought into existence through them are not appropriately gauged or measured by the intellectualist's standards of cognitive importance, for though they are not irrelevant to the achievements of "being" and "having," what these forms of intentionality may reveal is not governed by an anticipation of truth and knowledge. The being and having of meaning, and the world understood through such meaning, do not presuppose a will to knowledge and truth.

The point is strikingly made in some of Emily Dickinson's letters. First, one to Louise Norcross, written in 1865:

I am glad my little girl is at peace. Peace is a deep place. Some, too faint to push, are assisted by angels.
 I have more to say to you all than March has to maples, but then I cannot write in bed. I read a few words since I came home—John Talbot's parting with his son, and Margaret's with Suffolk. I read them in the garret, and the rafters wept. Remember me to your company, their Bedouin guest.
 Every day in the desert, Ishmael counts his tents. New heart makes new health, dear.
 Happiness is haleness. I dreamed last night I heard bees fight for pond-lily stamens, and waked with a fly in my room.
 Shall you be strong enough to lift me by the first of April? I won't be half as heavy as I was before. I will be good and chase my spools.
 I shall think of my little Eve going away from Eden. Bring me a jacinth for every finger, and an onyx shoe.¹⁰⁰

My experience of this letter may be odd, eccentric, not sensitive or responsive to its solicitations, but is my experience of it a "bold venture that awaits its reward in confirmation by the object"?¹⁰¹ Are the meanings solicited by "Some, too faint to push, are assisted by angels," the beginning of knowledge, knowledge for which we could—or would—provide evidence and arguments? Are *Vorurteile* being "tested" here to distinguish the true from the false, or are habitual meanings participating in and inventing "savours, colors, weights, tempos and directions"? How shall I proceed to determine whether my *Vorurteile* conflict with what is "true" concerning the object? Is my reward here "confirmation by the object" or what D. H. Lawrence called a "new effort of attention," i.e., a reconstruction of the meanings through which the world is familiar to me?

Here is another letter of Emily Dickinson, this one to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, written in 1871: "Has All—a codicil?"¹⁰² The "savours" and "colors" of meaning in Dickinson's letter do not require a structuring principle as excluding and constraining as knowledge conditions, precisely because the meanings set in motion by Dickinson's four words overflow the constraints and concerns of truth and knowledge. Justification and validation simply are not essential features of my experience and understanding of Dickinson's words, not unless one has decided that being and being known—being true—are indistinguishable. Gadamer has made this deci-

sion; this no doubt is partly why he sees his effort as one of formulating “an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth,” one which he believes grows out of experience itself. This “different notion of knowledge and truth,” however, does not do justice to Emily Dickinson’s letter. Dewey would not be surprised, for in his view all those philosophical systems must fail—including in this case Gadamer’s hermeneutics—which rest on the assumption that, in Dewey’s words, “everything in its reality . . . is what a knower would find it to be . . .”¹⁰³ As Dewey recognized, this is contrary to our experience of a habit-made world.

V

In contrasting habit and prejudice, I have tried to show that truth-anticipating prejudice foreshortens and renders monochromatic the colors and intensities of experience. My comparison of Dewey and Gadamer has not disclosed any strong grounds upon which Gadamer’s hermeneutics could be called “universal.” On the contrary, meaning that seeks validation as its perfection is, in Dewey’s view, a rather specialized sort of meaning and certainly cannot be the basis of a universal hermeneutics that purports to illumine “what is common to all modes of understanding.”¹⁰⁴ Qualities and properties are specified and grasped—sensed—prior to testing, confirming, argumentation. Gadamer’s theory of *Vorurteil* requires us to say that experience is not experience unless it is “continually confirmed,”¹⁰⁵ unless it is “an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth.”¹⁰⁶ There is little of interest or importance in the mind unless it is before the mind as a belief or argument, as “an event of truth.”

Perhaps, though, I still do not do justice to the radical transformation of truth in Gadamer along Heideggerian lines. Although it seems clear that experience for Gadamer is always an occasion for testing our “claim to truth,” perhaps truth is a far more subtle concept in Gadamer than I have made it out to be. That it is elusive there seems to be general agreement. Richard Bernstein’s remark that Gadamer “is employing a concept of truth that he never fully makes explicit,”¹⁰⁷ is fairly representative on the issue of truth in Gadamer. If, however, close attention is paid to the letter-writing example in Gadamer, not as something incidental to his whole project but rather as a consummation of it, it is apparent that the “ideal of truth” is—at least—that of being validly informed, of receiving an “authentic picture” of the “thing itself,” of giving assent to someone who has “validly learned” of an event. A letter transmits a truth and is a truth claim. The letter-writer