The Responsibility to Understand

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The concern of the present inquiry is whether, and, if so, how, Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of hermeneutical understanding can help us grasp the character of our ethical responsibility, and, indeed, a sense of responsibility that remains answerable to the plurality of our always singular and contingent ethical experiences. This concern is, to be sure, a broad one that can and has been pursued from multiple perspectives. The focus of this essay, however, is to shed novel light on the responsibility at stake in understanding—or, as this may be referred to more simply, the responsibility to understand—on the motif of Gadamer's call for us to “elevate” ourselves “to humanity” through “the aptitude [Fähigkeit] for conversation.”1 This identification of the responsibility to understand with our elevation of ourselves to our humanity appears, initially at least, to stand in opposition to Heidegger’s celebrated (some would say notorious) criticism of humanism in his “Letter on ‘Humanism’” and elsewhere.2 Yet, as we shall see, Gadamer's call for us to elevate ourselves to our humanity in fact may be grasped as an “extreme” form of humanism that answers to criticisms of the humanist tradition prevalent since they were first raised by Heidegger in his “Letter on ‘Humanism’.” With this, as I shall argue, Gadamer identifies the achievement of humanity through the aptitude to converse not with the will to acquire and employ technical skill in communication or etiquette. Rather, he associates our humanity with the openness to place ourselves within a larger context, in which we recognize ourselves less as a subject or agent than through the responsiveness to the other in the exteriority of being that gives sense to the self in the first place. Or, as Gadamer sums up the idea: we achieve our humanity when we “listen to the other.”3

Because the responsibility to understand exceeds all recourse to anything thus pre-given, we are left exposed to the incalculable possibilities and dangers harbored within the scenes of our encounters. Although Gadamer’s acknowledgment of the precariousness that attends this exposure cannot seriously be doubted, his considerations of the matter remain admittedly understated. In this, Gadamer's approach to the responsibility to understand perhaps suggests

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something of the “urbanizing” of Heidegger first attributed to him by Jürgen Habermas.4 Gadamer’s recognition of this precariousness can nevertheless be discerned in the implication of his approach that the responsibility to understand leaves us in what I shall call a predicament of the exception. On the one hand, as we shall see, Gadamer maintains that the responsibility to understand, whatever else it entails, always bids us not to make an exception of ourselves: we experience this appeal as something that binds us without qualification and without negotiation. Yet, on the other hand, Gadamer recognizes that our responsibility to understand always arises within factically situated circumstances that are thus as unique as they are fluid. In virtue of this, our efforts to be responsible always require us to take exception to whatever orientation we have taken in previous occasions. Once our responsibility to understand is awakened, this predicament of the exception—that we are called at once not to except ourselves and yet to recognize every circumstance as exceptional—is and remains definitive for our involvement with whatever we encounter.

Gadamer’s identification of the responsibility to understand with the elevation of ourselves to our humanity does, to be sure, seem to run counter to the suspicion of humanism that appears to have become du jour in continental ethics in recent decades and in any case since Heidegger’s “Letter on ‘Humanism.’” Heidegger, we recall, criticizes humanism because the conceptions of humanity that characterize the humanist tradition are bound up with metaphysical essentialism. “Every humanism,” as Heidegger makes the point, “is either grounded in metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one.”5 After Heidegger, figures as diverse as Frantz Fanon and Jean François Lyotard have interrogated humanism as part and parcel of the bequest of the Western tradition from which the multiple ethical crises of our times now call us to twist free. Yet, several figures in continental thought since Heidegger suggest that the ethical crises of our times require us not only to become suspicious of this bequest but also creatively to intervene and re-appropriate—or, in a term familiar to us from Gadamer—to rehabilitate themes from tradition that promise to help us come to terms with the challenges we face.

In this, we remember that not only Gadamer but also others, such as Sartre and Levinas, make celebrated attempts to develop humanist themes that expand beyond the limits of the kind of traditional humanism that Heidegger, for example, critiques. More broadly, we may also think of further efforts to re-appropriate themes from other strands of the Western tradition, such as